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CLASSICS AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

Any discussion of ancient Greek and Roman drama on the contemporary stage must begin with a brief acknowledgment of both the radically increased worldwide interest in translating, (often radically) revising, and performing these plays in the past thirty-five years and the growing scholarly response to that development. Electronic resources are developing to record not only recent but many more past performances, from the Renaissance to the present.[1] A group of scholars at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford—Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, Oliver Taplin, and their associates Pantelis Michelakis and Amanda Wrigley—are at the forefront, along with Lorna Hardwick and her associates at the U.K.'s Open University, in organizing conferences and lecture series; these have already resulted in several volumes that aim to understand the recent explosion of performances as well as to develop a more extensive picture of earlier reception of Greek and Roman drama (above all, Greek tragedy, to which this essay will be largely confined).[2] These scholars, along with others, have also tried to confront conceptual issues involved in the theatrical reception of classical texts.[3] Most earlier work has confined itself to studies of individual performances and adaptations or to significant directors and playwrights; an important and exemplary exception is Hall and Macintosh's recent *Greek Tragedy and British Theatre 1660–1914*.[4] This massive study profits from an unusually advantageous set of archival materials preserved in part due to official efforts to censor works presented on the British stage. *Oedipus Rex*, for example, was not licensed for a professional production until 1910 due to its scandalous incest theme. This study makes a particular effort to locate performances in their social and historical contexts, a goal shared by other recent studies of postcolonial reception discussed below.[5] For example, British *Medea*s, which repeatedly responded to controversies over the legal and political status of women, always represented the heroine's choice to kill her children as forced on her from the outside rather than as an autonomous choice. Such connections between the performance of Greek tragedy and historical feminism have proved

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significant in many later contexts worldwide. Work on the aesthetic side of performances of Greek drama, including translation, is at an earlier stage, but has begun to take advantage of important recent work on ancient staging, acting, and performance space.[6]

Many studies have tried to explore the recent revival of interest in Greek tragedy. Scholars have offered the following tentative hypotheses. First, Greek tragedy no longer belongs to the West. As David Wiles put it,

> The idea that we study Greek plays because that is how "our" theatre began seems less and less compelling. The main reason now for studying Greek plays is the opportunity which they provide to create performances in the present. . . . Geographically Greece is a place where east meets west, and it is not a hegemonic power like the land of Shakespeare, so the drama of Greece is well placed to become a shared cultural possession, a vehicle for communication.[7]

As Kevin Wetmore has argued in *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky*, African dramatists are familiar with Greek tragedy from the colonial education, but they often view it as having been composed prior to that historical experience and as part of an earlier multicultural Mediterranean environment in which they were participants. Hence it is particularly available for appropriation. Yet because the plays themselves can open a complex dialogue with other cultures, performances and new versions across the globe have also become a site for exploring cultural conflict. As Marianne McDonald has shown in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, Suzuki Tadashi's *Clytemnestra* and *Bacchae*, for example, not only mixed Eastern and Western traditions pointedly but faced off actors speaking in Japanese and English. Not only Japanese, but Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian traditions resonate with the antinaturalistic conventions of Greek myth and theatre, which has led to important, imaginative, and eclectic new versions and productions by playwrights like Wole Soyinka or directors like Yukio Ninagawa, Suzuki Tadashi, Ariane Mnouchkine, Heiner Müller, and Robert Wilson, to name just a few that have received scholarly attention. (The bibliography is too extensive to mention here.)

Greek literary and theatrical tradition itself invited continual, competitive revisions of its myths, and the necessity of performing its plays in translation with little knowledge of the original staging already means that every performance is an adaptation that responds to the present, even if it also looks to capture important aspects of the past. The possibilities provided by Greek myths and plots continue to resonate both psychologically and politically (though how and why remains a question); but, as the playwright Charles Mee in particular has stressed in relation to his many new versions of Greek tragedy,[8] they are familiar enough to permit fragmentation, deconstruction, and remaking in a legible way (especially since the playwrights are dead). Erika Fischer-Lichte's discussion of the Berliner Schaubühne's Antiquity Project as a theatrical response to the 1960s offers another case in point: "It justified the

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reversal of the hierarchy between text and performance, word and body, and at the same time, problematized attempts to relate classical texts directly to social claims and concerns. . . . It made clear that theatre does not allow for an unmediated encounter with the past, that it cannot 'revive' it."[9] Greek tragedy itself permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical;[10] perhaps for that reason, more topical productions, as Edith Hall has repeatedly demonstrated, remain controversial.[11] Others, such as the feminist and drag versions and performances that I have studied elsewhere, have tended to take advantage of the highly explicit and controversial gender politics of Greek drama in a more general way;[12] actresses and cross-dressing actors have become increasingly attached to the major, if often horrific, opportunities provided by female roles (originally played by men) such as Medea, Clytemnestra, Phaedra, Antigone, or Electra, especially given the limited alternatives provided by the theatrical repertory. Tragedy, especially *Antigone*, has also permitted a way around censorship in many contexts such as occupied France or Greece under the colonels; the topic is currently being researched for Greece by Gonda van Steen. The fact that Greek religion is no longer practiced also permits a freer range of meditations on and responses to ritual, conceptions of divinity, controversial moral and intellectual issues, and human suffering. Richard Schechner's work more generally and his landmark performance *Dionysus in 69* have, for example, addressed some of the issues relating to ritual, but much remains to be done.[13]

Although some recent performances of Greek tragedy have succeeded in large venues or even on Broadway, the genre continues to pose problems for the modern stage, as well as for scholars who study productions, in a number of dimensions. The chorus has only recently begun to receive due attention.[14] Although new minimalist versions of Greek tragedy (even excluding music and dance) have been successful, productions of the originals without adequate resources (both financial and artistic) to include ambitious music and dance have by and large failed to deal imaginatively with Greek choruses. Indeed, choruses are in principle more difficult to make engaging on a proscenium stage for an eclectic audience that does not have the sense of community with the traditions for which these plays were once designed. Despite various experiments ranging from more traditional to avant-garde, there has yet to be a production with the full range of music and dance by both actors and chorus found in the originals (including actors' solos and sung exchanges with the chorus) even in modern Greek productions, which are noted for their ambitious and well-trained choral performances; and even if there were to be, the problem of creating a rationale for the chorus in each production remains.

Technically, the chorus is one of a number of problems posed for performances of the original plays that need further exploration. The conventions of Greek tragedy—lengthy debates, limited events occurring in a limited time span, or offstage violence—run into a growing suspicion of rhetoric on one hand, and expectations for action and character development on the other. Many performances now bring violence onto the stage, but it is not clear that a few gory moments fully meet the expectations of those educated above all by film.

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The appearances of gods, usually at the beginning and end of tragedies, can produce a perspective on the action or a form of closure that created problems even for Aristotle, and many productions eliminate or strongly ironize them. The use of masks has begun to receive more extensive attention by both scholars such as David Wiles and theatre practitioners such as Sir Peter Hall and Peter Sellars, however.[15]

The current enormous range of adaptations and new versions continues to produce much controversy. How malleable can one be, if an attempt at historical authenticity is to a greater or lesser degree abandoned, and still be understood as responding seriously to Greek tragedy? Mary-Kay Gamel's book in progress on the question of authenticity will respond to Amy Green's important earlier study, *The Revisionist Stage*. Can new verse plays work on the modern stage (the majority of recent translations for the stage or new versions have avoided verse), and to the degree that prose translations or new versions drop to a consistently colloquial register, can they sustain the kind of depth and linguistic power (a mix of public and private, poetic and rhetorical language) traditionally expected of tragedy? Reviewers often quibble over the accessibility or beauty of often quickly dated translations. Yet strong and opposing expectations of tone on the part of both scholars and audiences make the issue particularly problematic in the case of Greek (or the rarely done Roman) drama. No general studies have been published, but Taplin's essay on Seamus Heaney's translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, offers a recent, useful starting point.[16] Both Wiles's *Greek Theatre Performance* and Rush Rehm's *The Play of Space* have offered examinations of the use of space on the ancient stage that will facilitate further study of changes of setting or costume that can raise less significant but comparable issues. When character fails to serve the action—an aspect of tragedy that Aristotle thought critical—but is instead developed for its own sake, what do we gain or lose? Similarly, new versions can domesticate Greek tragedy by focusing on neurotic individuals in dysfunctional families to the exclusion of the public setting and questions of power and status central to the originals. As I myself have noted,[17] Jules Dassin's 1978 film, *A Dream of Passion*, well explored the problems of turning Medea into the kind of jealous, disempowered, often abused, crazed, or inarticulate woman who actually kills her children that we read about in newspapers. I also argued that something equally controversial can occur when feminist versions give their heroines a larger voice.[18] In some new versions of *Oedipus Rex* that expanded Jocasta into an explicitly desiring, articulate mother, Jocasta's maternal body often upstaged and marginalized Oedipus and eliminated the heroine's public role as a queen of Thebes who actively mediates between her husband and her brother Creon. For scholars (and in a different way, artists and critics), the pressure to come to terms with the questions of judgment and interpretation posed by the disturbing range and eclecticism of contemporary performance and adaptation of classical drama can both illuminate the study of the originals and raise complex methodological problems for a field that has only recently begun to take on the reception of the Greek and Roman classics extensively.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at Oxford has an international database [*www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/asp/database.htm*]; the Athens-based European Network of Performances of Ancient Greek Drama has a database in process [*www.cc.uoa.gr/drama/network/index.html*]; and the Berlin Archiv für Antikerezeption in der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945, organized by Bernd Seidensticker [*www.antikerezeption.fu-berlin.de/*], includes theatrical performances. For other important new resources available, see the APGRD home page and the Open University at [*www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/*]. For an electronic journal that specializes in performance, see *Didaskalia*, at [*didaskalia.open.ac.uk/*].

2. Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin, eds., *Medea in Performance 1500–2000* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000); Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley, eds., *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Macintosh et al., eds., *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC–AD 2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also my "Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 129 (1999): 1–12; my "Twentieth-Century Performance and Adaptation of Euripides," *Illinois Classical Studies* 24–5 (1999–2000): 1–13; and Marianne McDonald, *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2003). For important earlier general studies, see Amy S. Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and two essays in particular in Patricia E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): Peter Burian, "Tragedy Adapted for Stages and Screens: The Renaissance to the Present," 228–83; and Fiona Macintosh, "Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Productions," 284–323. I have confined myself here to works in English.

3. See, e.g., my "Envisioning the Chorus on the Tragic Stage," in Christina S. Kraus et al., eds., *Visualizing the Tragic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Edith Hall, "Towards a Theory of Performance Reception," *Arion* 12.1 (2004): 51–89; Sir Peter Hall, *Exposed by the Mask* (London: Theatre Communications Group, 2000); Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies: Greece & Rome*, New Surveys in the Classics, no. 33 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Further work in progress is mentioned below.

4. Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For earlier studies, see Marianthe Colakis, *The Classics in the American Theater of the 1960s and Early 1970s* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993); Karelisa V. Hartigan, *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage: Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theater, 1882–1994* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995); Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

5. For book-length studies, see Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London: Duckworth, 2000); Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton, *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 2002); Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2002); and Wetmore, *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2003).

6. Eric Csapo and W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Patricia E. Easterling and Edith Hall, eds., *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

7. David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2. The book includes brief discussions of many non-Western performances.

8. These plays are available at his Web page at [*www.charlesmee.org/html/plays.html*].

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9. Fischer-Lichte, "Thinking about the Origins of Theatre in the 1970s," in *Dionysus since 69*, 329–60, at 343–4.

10. See my "Modern Performance," 3.

11. See especially Hall, "Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century?" and "Aeschylus, Race, Class, and War in the 1990s," in *Dionysus since 69*, 1–46 and 169–98.

12. See my "Bad Women: Gender Politics in Late Twentieth-Century Performance and Revision of Greek Tragedy," in *Dionysus since 69*, 77–112.

13. See Schechner, ed., *The Performance Group: Dionysus in 69* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1970), with further discussion and bibliography in Froma I. Zeitlin, "Dionysus in 69," in *Dionysus since 69*, 49–76.

14. See my "Envisioning the Chorus," with further bibliography.

15. Wiles, "The Use of Masks in Modern Performances of Greek Drama," in *Dionysus since 69*, 245–64, with further work in progress; Hall, *Exposed*; and Sellars in McDonald, *Ancient Sun*, who argues for microphones as a form of mask (93).

16. Taplin, "Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Seamus Heaney's, and Some Other Recent Half-Rhymes," in *Dionysus Since 69*, 145–68.

17. Foley, "Modern Performance," 10–11.

18. "Bad Women," 80–9.

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