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A Dialogue Across Centuries: Greek Theatre Then and Now

Edited by Andreas Markantonatos,
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INTRODUCTION

Revisiting Ancient Greek Drama in the Modern World

The endurance of Ancient Greek drama across centuries is one of the most striking and profound phenomena in the history of human culture. Conceived in the civic, ritual, and aesthetic world of Classical Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the tragedies and comedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander were in their origin tied intimately to the life of the polis. They were performed in open-air theatres before large audiences of citizens and foreigners, embedded within festivals that combined religious ritual with civic spectacle. And yet, far beyond the horizon of the ancient city-state, these plays have travelled through time, carried across languages, nations, and artistic forms, continually reappearing on new stages and in new guises. To speak of the modern reception of Ancient Greek drama is therefore to speak of a long history of transformation, in which texts composed for a world now distant have persistently revealed themselves to be inexhaustibly adaptable, resonant, and alive (Goldhill 2007).

What is most striking about this phenomenon is that the modern reception of Greek drama is never simply an act of preservation. It is always also an act of reinvention. The plays reach us through a process of transmission that is itself selective, fragmentary, and mediated. Many works have been lost entirely; others survive only in partial form; some come down to us through manuscripts copied centuries after their composition (West 1973). Yet the works that remain—whether in complete tragedies and comedies or in tantalising fragments—have proved fertile ground for reinterpretation. The act of reception is, therefore, an act of imagination. Translators, scholars, directors, poets, political thinkers, and audiences alike bring their own horizons of expectation to bear on the texts, seeing in them not a static heritage but a set of possibilities to be realised in particular times and places (Hardwick 2003). This double nature—of timelessness and timeliness—has often been remarked upon. On the one hand, Greek tragedy and comedy have long been admired for their universal themes: fate, justice, love, death, laughter, community, conflict. On the other hand, every modern engagement with these plays is irreducibly historical, conditioned by the circumstances of the moment. When Jean Anouilh's Antigone premiered in

Nazi-occupied Paris in 1944, it carried a resonance that no Athenian audience could have anticipated (Anouilh 1944). When modern feminist theatre-makers revisit Medea, they explore dimensions of gender, agency, and oppression that reconfigure the meaning of the myth for contemporary audiences (Foley 2001). And when Aristophanes is staged as a commentator on modern politics, his satire reveals that the absurdities of demagoguery, war, and public discourse are not confined to the ancient polis (Hall 2007). In this sense, Greek drama is not only a legacy from the past; it is also a medium through which the present speaks to itself. The tragedies of the fifth century have proven especially fertile in this respect. Philosophers, critics, and dramatists alike have found in them a paradigm for thinking about the human condition. Hegel regarded tragedy as the dramatic enactment of a conflict between legitimate but opposed ethical forces: the law of the gods against the law of men, the demands of family against the claims of the state (Hegel 1975). Nietzsche saw in Greek tragedy the embodiment of a primordial tension between the Apollonian impulse towards order and the Dionysian drive towards ecstasy and dissolution (Nietzsche 1967). George Steiner, in The Death of Tragedy, argued that true tragedy was possible only under conditions of metaphysical belief, conditions that modernity has largely lost (Steiner 1961). By contrast, the structuralist analyses of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, and the feminist readings of Nicole Loraux, have emphasised the way tragedy articulates the political and social tensions of the Athenian polis, giving voice to conflicts over gender, citizenship, and power (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988; Loraux 2002).

These theoretical accounts are not abstract exercises detached from performance. Rather, they inform and are informed by the ways in which tragedy has been staged in the modern era. Few plays illustrate this more vividly than Antigone. Since the nineteenth century, Antigone has been repeatedly reinterpreted as a drama of resistance, conscience, and law (Honig 2013). In Germany, Hegel read the play as the supreme illustration of tragic conflict, while in the twentieth century Brecht reworked it into a Marxist parable about war and tyranny (Brecht 1948). Across Europe and beyond, Antigone has been adapted in contexts of dictatorship and civil strife, from Latin America to post-apartheid South Africa, serving as a rallying point for those who see in her defiance a model of moral courage (Steiner 1984). Medea, too, has inspired countless reinterpretations, from the Romantic fascination with her destructive passion to modern feminist explorations of her status as an outsider, a foreign woman who confronts betrayal with terrible agency (Morwood 1997). The Oresteia, meanwhile, has often been read as a political allegory of justice and the emergence of the rule of law, its modern revivals speaking to societies grappling with cycles of violence and the search for reconciliation (Macintosh 2018).

If tragedy has given modernity a language for its deepest dilemmas, comedy has provided a stage for laughter, satire, and critique. Aristophanes, whose plays lampooned politicians, intellectuals, and cultural fashions of his day, has proved surprisingly adaptable to modern contexts. His Lysistrata, in which women withhold sex to force an end to war, has become a staple of anti-war theatre, revived during the Vietnam War and in countless contexts of protest (Senelick 2000). The Clouds, which ridiculed Socrates and the new education, has often been read in relation to debates about intellectual authority, scepticism, and social change (Dover 1972). What modern directors have discovered is that Aristophanic comedy, with its exuberant obscenity, absurd fantasy, and biting satire, translates remarkably well into contemporary idioms of humour (Henderson 1975). It speaks to the ways in which laughter can be politically charged, undermining authority, exposing folly, and reimagining the possible. Even Menander, once overshadowed by Aristophanes, has contributed to the modern rediscovery of comedy as a form rooted in everyday life, his fragments illuminating the dynamics of family, love, and society in ways that resonate with modern social theatre (Arnott 1979).

Yet reception is not confined to textual interpretation. The performance traditions of modern theatre have played a decisive role in reshaping Greek drama. From the grandiose neoclassical revivals of the eighteenth century (Hall and Macintosh 2005) to the radical experiments of the twentieth, directors and performers have treated ancient plays as a canvas for innovation. The modernist minimalism of Peter Brook (Brook 1968), the politically charged productions of Ariane Mnouchkine (Mnouchkine 1990), the ritualist explorations of Jerzy Grotowski (Grotowski 1968), and the fragmented postmodern reworkings of Heiner Müller (Müller 1982) all testify to the capacity of Greek drama to inspire theatrical revolutions. In each case, the ancient texts provide not a script to be repeated but a provocation to be reimagined. In our own time, intercultural adaptations have brought Greek drama into dialogue with non-Western traditions: Antigone staged through Japanese Noh, Medea reimagined through African ritual, Oedipus performed in Caribbean contexts of colonial history (Goff 2005). Film, too, has become a medium for reception, from Pasolini's Medea with Maria Callas (Pasolini 1969) to modern cinematic adaptations that transpose ancient plots into contemporary settings. Digital media and virtual reality now offer yet another horizon, suggesting that the afterlife of Greek drama is far from exhausted.

What these examples reveal is that Greek drama continues to function as a site of cultural and political negotiation. In moments of crisis, societies turn to these plays to articulate their anxieties, hopes, and struggles. During the Second World War and its aftermath, Antigone became a symbol of resistance to tyranny;

under military dictatorships, Electra has been staged as a cry for justice; in the postcolonial world, Greek drama has been reworked to expose the legacies of empire and to assert new cultural identities (McDonald 1992). The plays have been used to debate questions of democracy, freedom, gender, migration, and violence. Their universality lies not in timeless messages but in their extraordinary openness to reinterpretation, their ability to be appropriated for new struggles and new visions of justice.

The study of this process has itself become an academic field. Once subsumed under the broader notion of the "classical tradition," reception studies has emerged in recent decades as a distinct area of inquiry (Martindale 1993). Scholars have shifted from asking how faithfully modern works reproduce ancient models to exploring how ancient texts are reimagined, transformed, and contested (Hardwick and Stray 2008). This methodological shift has opened the way for interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together philology, theatre studies, translation studies, performance theory, political philosophy, psychoanalysis, gender theory, and postcolonial criticism (Goldhill 2004). Greek drama, in particular, has become a privileged object of such studies, precisely because of its long and varied afterlife. To study the reception of Antigone is to study not only a play by Sophocles but also Hegelian philosophy, Brechtian theatre, feminist theory, and the politics of resistance movements across continents. To study Aristophanes is to examine not only the Athenian comic stage but also modern satire, parody, and the cultural politics of humour. Reception studies thus reveals the continuing centrality of ancient drama to the intellectual and artistic life of the modern world (Hall 2010).

This collection of essays is situated within that broader field. It brings together contributions that examine the ways in which tragedy and comedy have been reinterpreted in modern literature, theatre, cinema, and theory. Some essays focus on specific plays and their adaptations; others analyse broader cultural patterns in the appropriation of Greek drama. Together, they illuminate the multiplicity of receptions, the diversity of contexts, and the creative energy that sustains the afterlife of these works. The volume does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey, for such a task would be impossible; rather, it offers a series of windows onto the processes by which ancient drama continues to inspire and provoke.

At stake in all of this is a larger question: why do these plays matter today? The answer, I suggest, lies not in the illusion that they provide eternal truths, nor in the claim that they belong to us unaltered across time. Instead, their importance lies in their inexhaustible capacity to be remade. Each age finds in them a mirror of its own concerns, a vocabulary for its own struggles, a stage on which to dramatise its own conflicts. They remind us that the human

condition, though shaped by history, is also bound together by shared experiences of suffering, laughter, love, loss, and hope. In engaging with them, we are not only looking back to antiquity; we are also looking at ourselves, negotiating who we are and who we might become.

The essays that follow take up this negotiation in various ways. They show us how tragedy articulates the dilemmas of law and conscience, how comedy unmasks the follies of politics and society, how performance traditions reinvent ancient texts for modern stages, and how cultural contexts—from totalitarian regimes to postcolonial societies—appropriate Greek drama for their own purposes. They reveal, in other words, that Ancient Greek drama is not a relic of the past but a living tradition, continually reborn in new forms. To study its modern reception is to study the creative interplay of past and present, antiquity and modernity, memory and reinvention.

In the end, what endures is not the authority of the ancient texts as monuments, but their vitality as sources of meaning, provocation, and inspiration. They remind us that art is not only about preservation but also about transformation, that culture is not only about inheritance but also about creation. In this dynamic process, the stage of ancient Athens becomes, again and again, the stage of the modern world.

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SURVIVING DEATH: **EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS*** AND MYSTERY CULT

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Abstract: In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity. However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

Keywords: Euripides, Alcestis, Eleusis, Orphism, Athens, democracy.

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Introduction[1]

In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity.[2] However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

1 Both the Greek text and the English translation are drawn from the Loeb edition of Euripides by David Kovacs, 1994.

2 Markantonatos 2013, pp. 131-159.