

## PROFILE

## GREEK TRAGEDY AND PERFORMANCE

doi:10.1017/S0009840X23001300

Greek tragedy is easily one of the most dynamic fields in Classics. In addition to its perennial appeal and popularity among diverse audiences, every few years its study is reinvented and redefined as scholars and students apply new theories and critical lenses, many of which stem from contemporary concerns. In the last 50 years, for example, a rich body of work began to explore the manifold intersections between Greek tragedy and Athenian ritual and social practices, in line with rising interest in the social sciences. Over the past few decades scholars have slowly but steadily turned their gaze towards the performance and staging of tragedy and ancient Greek drama. To a large degree this interest has been fuelled by contemporary performance practice and experience, particularly as productions and adaptations of ancient plays have proliferated across the globe. Whereas the scholarship on the myriad ways in which Greek tragedy has been adapted and performed across the globe is itself a growing subfield deserving of its own profile,<sup>1</sup> my focus here is on recent scholarly and creative work produced in the last ten years that illuminates Athenian performance practices.<sup>2</sup> As I illustrate, we have come a long way since the seminal works of N.C. Hourmouziades (*Production and Imagination in Euripides: Form and Function of the Scenic Space* [1965]) and O. Taplin (*The*

<sup>1</sup>E.g. V. Liapis and A. Sidiropoulou (edd.), *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts* (2021); R. Andújar and K.P. Nikoloutsos (edd.), *Greeks and Romans on the Latin American Stage* (2020); E. Cole, *Postdramatic Tragedies* (2019); M. Powers, *Diversifying Greek Tragedy on the Contemporary US Stage* (2018); K. Boshier et al. (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (2015); A. Van Weyenberg, *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* (2013). Notable among current research collaborations is the ReTAGS project based at the University of Cape Town, led by Mark Fleishman with Mandla Mbothwe ([retags.uct.ac.za](https://retags.uct.ac.za)).

<sup>2</sup>For recent advances in the performance of comedy and satyr play see, e.g., M. Revermann, *Comic Business: Theatricality, Dramatic Technique, and Performance Contexts of Aristophanic Comedy* (2006); G. Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes* (2015); C. Fernández, ‘Hacia una poética de los objetos teatrales: el caso de la comedia de Aristófanes’, *Perífrasis* 8.16 (2017), 117–33; M. Griffith, *Greek Satyr Play: Five Studies* (2015). The discussion here is largely limited to fifth-century BCE Athenian performance practices, though various key books in the past decade have explored other performance contexts in antiquity, from other Greek venues beyond Athens (V. Vahtikari, *Tragedy Performances Outside Athens in the Late Fifth and the Fourth Centuries BC* [2014]; E. Stewart, *Greek Tragedy on the Move: the Birth of a Panhellenic Art Form c.500–300 BC* [2017]; E. Csapo and P. Wilson, *A Social and Economic History of the Theatre to 300 BC. Volume II: Theatre beyond Athens. Documents with Translation and Commentary* [2020]) to more far-flung locations such as the Black Sea (D. Braund, E. Hall and R. Wyles [edd.], *Ancient Theatre and Performance Culture around the Black Sea* [2019]) and Sicily (K. Boshier, *Greek Theater in Ancient Sicily* [2021]).

*Stagecraft of Aeschylus: the Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* [1977]), who were among the first to draw attention to tragedy as a performed art.

Starting with V. Di Benedetto and E. Medda's *La tragedia sulla scena: la tragedia greca in quanto spettacolo teatrale* (1997),<sup>3</sup> the study of tragic stagecraft and performance has witnessed a revolution in the past 25 years as studies on actors (P.E. Easterling and E. Hall [edd.], *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* [2002]; E. Csapo, *Actors and Icons of the Ancient Theater* [2010]), costumes (R. Wyles, *Costume in Greek Tragedy* [2011]), masks (D. Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation* [2007]; P. Meineck, 'The Neuroscience of the Tragic Mask', *Arion* 19 [2011], 113–58), props (C. Chaston, *Tragic Props and Cognitive Function: Aspects of the Function of Images in Thinking* [2010]), space (D. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* [1997]; R. Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* [2002]) and even ancient theatre terminology (C. Mauduit and J.-C. Moretti, 'Pollux, un lexicographe au théâtre', *REG* 123 [2010], 521–41) have enhanced our understanding of ancient performance practice. The past decade has produced a series of key introductions to the performance of Greek tragedy that have consolidated these advances. Though more broadly focused on drama, both Greek and Roman, G. Harrison and V. Liapis's edited volume *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre* (2013) offers a useful overview, as many of its essays explore theatrical spectacle (*opsis*), a category largely neglected by Aristotle. The introduction, written in collaboration with C. Panayotakis, provides a well-grounded discussion of prominent scholarly contributions and debates about ancient performance since the mid-twentieth century. Some helpful orientation on recent methodological debates can also be found in M. Powers's handbook (*Athenian Tragedy in Performance* [2014]). Other publications provide a more thorough examination of the stagecraft of specific plays and scenes. Notable among these are E. Medda's *La saggezza dell'illusione: studi sul teatro greco* (2013), whose essays on tragic stage action and scenic space provide new readings of plays such as Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Orestes*, C.W. Marshall's *The Structure and Performance of Euripides' Helen* (2014), focused around the two plays that Euripides produced in 412 BCE (*Helen* and the fragmentary *Andromeda*), and G.W. Most and L. Ozbek's *Staging Ajax's Suicide* (2015), a collection of multilingual essays centred on the fascinating scene in Sophocles' play stemming from a 2013 conference in Pisa. These books not only illuminate the role of ancient tragedians as producers (and not merely poets), but also expose both the conventions of the stage and the expectations of fifth-century viewing audiences, thus enabling fresh insights into the interpretation of ancient Greek tragedy beyond the surviving scripts.

Other works treat the technology in, and the expertise required of, ancient tragic theatre in more depth and detail than ever before. A rich strand of work informed by theories of 'new materialisms' and 'object-oriented ontology' focuses on the role and affordances of the objects and bodies that populated the Athenian stage. M. Mueller offers new readings of tragic props, such as Ajax's sword and Electra's urn (*Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* [2016]). Mueller's collaboration with M. Telò in *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (2018) further extends this attention to the power and agency of objects, but combines it with insights from the 'affective turn', producing an engaging set of essays that enrich our understanding of the vibrant nature of ancient theatrical performance. Of

<sup>3</sup>This has recently been translated into French by C. Mauduit: *La Tragédie sur la scène: la tragédie grecque comme spectacle théâtral* (2022).

particular significance to the performance of Greek tragedy is A. Duncan's excellent essay ('The Familiar Mask'). With a rich discussion of the offstage life of the tragic mask and how it functioned as a point of emotive contact for the viewing audience, the essay reveals tragic masks as symbols of collaborative and independently embodied performance. M.-H. Delavaud-Roux's edited collection *Corps et voix dans les danses du théâtre antique* (2019) draws our attention to the bodies of the performers of the ancient stage. Essays explore vocal exercises employed by ancient performers (K. Melidis, 'Quelle vocalité? Deux exercices vocaux de l'antiquité gréco-romaine') as well as dancers' abilities (M.-H. Delavaud-Roux, 'La gestion de l'essoufflement du danseur') and their potential limitations (S. Perrot, 'Le danseur peut-il devenir instrumentiste au théâtre?'). Rounding up this recent interest in objects and bodies and their materialities is N. Worman's *Tragic Bodies: Edges of the Human in Greek Drama* (2020), which studies the dramatic effects of tragic embodiment and the wider 'spectrum of aesthetic and affective dynamics' it facilitates (p. 8).

Directly opposed to materiality is the ephemeral, a notion fundamental to the study of performance in theatre studies. Ephemerality is central to recent adaptations of Greek drama, notably the 2022 Punchdrunk production *The Burnt City*, which adapted Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Hecuba* to provide London audiences with an immersive theatre experience of the Trojan War. A forthcoming book by E. Cole (*Punchdrunk on the Classics: Experiencing Immersion in The Burnt City and Beyond*) discusses how fragmentation was integral to this immersive experience, enabling masked participants to experience reinterpretation of canonical texts in a fragmented manner – across 200 rooms and by a cast of up to 50 performers.<sup>4</sup> In line with this interest in the ephemeral and fragmentary, recent work has emphasised the limited nature of our understanding of ancient Greek drama, especially as it hinges on a small selection of surviving texts.<sup>5</sup> The publication of new editions and commentaries have made fragmentary tragedies more accessible than ever before, leading to many books and articles that push scholarly debates about tragedy into new and exciting directions. P. Finglass and L. Coe's *Female Characters in Fragmentary Greek Tragedy* (2020) exemplifies the best of this work, with a series of rich essays that significantly challenge and expand our understanding of tragic gender. Two of its essays explore more directly the ways in which performance space, music, dance and gender intersect on the Athenian stage: A. Uhlig's 'Dancing on the Plain of the Sea: Gender and Theatrical Space in Aeschylus' *Achilleis* Trilogy' and C. Simone's 'The Music One Desires: Hypsipyle and Aristophanes' "Muse of Euripides"'.

Digital approaches to Greek tragedy have likewise enriched our understanding of ancient performance practice. During the COVID pandemic theatre underwent seismic changes as it moved from the stage to the screen, opening more intimate possibilities for theatrical spectacle. In the case of Greek tragedy, this resulted in several fascinating online productions of Greek tragedy, notably Theater of War's *Oedipus Project* and various prominent student productions of ancient plays in both the original Greek and in English translation (e.g. the 2021 Barnard/Columbia Ancient Drama Group's *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the Oxford production of *Orestes* in the same year), all of which are available on YouTube.<sup>6</sup> Though the pandemic may have forced this digital turn, it is important to

<sup>4</sup>For an overview of other recent creative engagements with tragic fragments see E. Cole, 'Fragments, Immersivity, and Reception: Punchdrunk on Aeschylus' *Kabeiroi*,' *Int. class. trad.* 28 (2021), 510–25.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. M. Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. 1: Neglected Authors* (2016); M. Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. 2: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (2019); A. Lamari, F. Montanari, and A. Novokhatko (edd.), *Fragmentation in Ancient Greek Drama* (2020).

note that various companies had already been creating digital versions and resources for Greek tragedy, such as Barefaced Greek, which has produced various short films of famous scenes including the watchman's speech from *Agamemnon* and Hecuba's lament from *Trojan Women* ([barefacedgreek.co.uk/films](http://barefacedgreek.co.uk/films)).<sup>7</sup> These creative digital engagements arguably reflect an interest in aligning Greek tragedy with the wider 'mediatisation' culture, but more crucially, in my view, they raise questions about the changing role of audience perception and engagement. Though there is important work on the way in which ancient tragic playwrights were able to direct and influence their viewing audiences' moods and perceptions – as recently explored by N. Weiss in a study of dramatic prologues ('Opening Spaces: Prologic Phenomenologies of Greek Tragedy and Comedy', *CIAnt* 39 [2020], 330–67) –, I suspect this will be an area of growth in the future for ancient performance studies.<sup>8</sup>

The last ten years have seen a significant rise in scholarship on the chorus, notably edited volumes by R. Gagné and M. Hopman (*Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy* [2013]), J. Billings, F. Budelmann and F. Macintosh (*Choruses, Ancient and Modern* [2013]), the 2015 issue of then newly launched *Skenè* journal edited by G. Avezzù (*The Chorus in Drama. Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* [2015], 1.1), and C. Calame's long-awaited *La tragédie chorale: poésie grecque et rituel musical* (2017), all of which offer fresh perspectives on the complex collective at the heart of Greek drama. The most exciting work on the tragic chorus in performance stems from recent advances in our understanding of ancient music.<sup>9</sup> N. Weiss, for example, examines the use of musical language, imagery and performance in the late plays of Euripides (*The Music of Tragedy: Performance and Imagination in Euripidean Theater* [2018]). Responsible for many of these new insights into the conditions and context of music in antiquity is MOISA, the International Society for the Study of Greek and Roman Music. In 2013 it launched the journal *Greek and Roman Musical Studies*, which publishes articles, reviews and reports of conferences and seminars devoted to ancient music. Though there are numerous relevant articles illuminating the performance of Greek tragedy, I highlight two that exemplify the fascinating new work that this journal has enabled: A. Dolazza's investigation of the gestures and movements of pipe-players (*aulētai*) in the theatre ('Il corpo dell'auleta: produzione, percezione e visualizzazione del suono', *GRMS* 4.2 [2016]) and A. Conser's study of pitch accent and melody in Aeschylus' lyrics (*GRMS* 8.2 [2020]). The journal also published the score produced by A. D'Angour, stemming from his innovative efforts to reconstruct the melody of Euripides' *Orestes* based on the musical notation found in a surviving papyrus fragment ('Recreating the Music of Euripides' *Orestes*', *GRMS* 9.1 [2021]). A performance of this remarkable chorus is available on YouTube ([youtu.be/Dc97mwbbMds](https://youtu.be/Dc97mwbbMds)). Barefaced Greek, mentioned above, has also produced a few short films reflecting this rich engagement with ancient music, notably the parodos of Euripides' *Phaethon* and the 'Ode to Man' in Sophocles' *Antigone*.

<sup>6</sup>A recent online conference explored digital performances across the globe during the pandemic, from Brazil to Nigeria, via Greece and Italy ([research.reading.ac.uk/curiosi/performing-ancient-greek-literature-in-a-time-of-pandemic](https://research.reading.ac.uk/curiosi/performing-ancient-greek-literature-in-a-time-of-pandemic)).

<sup>7</sup>For a study of digital practices within the contemporary performance of Greek tragedy, see G. Rodosthenous and A. Poulou (edd.), *Greek Tragedy and the Digital* (2023).

<sup>8</sup>Sadly, this piece was written before the publication of N. Weiss, *Seeing Theater: The Phenomenology of Classical Greek Drama* (2023).

<sup>9</sup>For an excellent overview see the Companion by T.A.C. Lynch and E. Rocconi (edd.), *A Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Music* (2020), as well as the extensive bibliography curated by the MOISA Society (<https://www.moisasociety.org/bibliography/>).

These musical shorts were directed by Helen Eastman in collaboration with composer Alex Silverman, the talented creative duo behind the double bill Cambridge Greek Plays of 2013 and 2016 ([cambridgegreekplay.com](http://cambridgegreekplay.com)).

Dance has been another key area of focus in ancient performance, as evidenced by recent books by S. Olsen (*Solo Dance in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature: Representing the Unruly Body* [2020]), and the edited volumes by L. Gianvittorio-Ungar (*Choreutika: Performing and Theorising Dance in Ancient Greece* [2017]), and with K. Schlapbach, (*Choreonarratives: Dancing Stories in Greek and Roman Antiquity and Beyond* [2021]), as well as the forthcoming collaboration edited by Z. Alonso Fernández and S. Olsen (*Imprints of Dance in Ancient Greece and Rome* [2023]). Though more broadly conceived, these volumes offer many insights into Greek tragedy. Olsen, for example, describes how the transgressive nature of solo dance in the Greek imaginary informs scenes where actors dance in plays such as *Prometheus Bound* and *Ion*. Recent approaches on the modern reception of the chorus, such as that by E. Baudou (*Créer le chœur tragique: une archéologie du commun* [2021]), likewise confirm that attention to the ancient tragic chorus' dance, movements and meaning will continue to expand in the coming years. Overall, the impressive range of scholarship illustrates the evolving ways of approaching performance in the Greek theatre. Tragic spectacle is no longer a simple matter of staging and visual effects, as this work shows; rather it necessarily encompasses wider sound- and dancescapes as well as the varying responses that these immersive environments are able to elicit among audiences.

*King's College London*

ROSA ANDÚJAR  
[rosa.andujar@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:rosa.andujar@kcl.ac.uk)