Introduction

Does the new century need a new introduction to Greek theatre? There are good books on the market. Several are written by directors of Greek plays, who are particularly well equipped to show you how to read plays in accordance with their sole original purpose: to make sense in performance. There has not been any avalanche of new discoveries, new hard information. The ancient world has not changed . . . How could it? Yet *we* have changed. Our assumptions are different, and our questions are different. Here are some of my own assumptions that led me to embark on this book.

(1) A new readership has emerged from the new academic discipline of theatre studies. I have written supposing that the reader of this book knows nothing about ancient Greece, but has some sophistication in the analysis of performance. I hope that readers coming from classical studies will nevertheless find themselves interested by questions that emerge from a different academic agenda. I regard this book as an interdisciplinary study.

(2) As soon as theatre studies emerged as a discipline, it became clear that no one within the discipline actually knew what 'theatre' was. Performance reaches into all areas of life and it is an arbitrary convention which dubs one activity 'theatre', another circus, a wrestling match, a job interview. There is a danger of circularity. We know what 'theatre' and 'drama' are because we derive those words and concepts from the Greeks; armed with that knowledge, we return to the Greeks and analyse their 'theatre' accordingly. I have not, in this book, assumed that I know where theatre stops and mere 'performance' begins. I have tried to understand tragedy and comedy as two activities within a remarkable culture that fostered many types of performance.

(3) Practitioners of theatre must not claim too boldly the privilege of knowing how their artistic medium works, for Greek theatre was

not understood as 'art' in any recognizable modern terms. We can no longer study the history of Greek *theatre* in conceptual isolation. Theatre was an integral part of Athenian *culture*, whose values and practices differed profoundly from those of the modern west. This anthropological premise lies behind much important recent research within classical studies; it is shared, for example, by the contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*.

(4) I do not believe that Greece was the cradle of *my* civilization because I inhabit an increasingly globalized culture. In many ways Greek civilization seems to me much closer to India or Japan, in its attitude to the harmony of mind and body for example, and its assumption that the universe is inhabited by gods and demigods. The idea that we should 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. Of course, their ability to communicate today is tied to their history, and the fact that they are familiar. Geographically Greece is a place where east meets west, and it is not today 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.

(5) To study Greek theatre anthropologically, i.e. as a social practice, is to throw out the old separation of form and content. It is no longer good enough to think we can first study the *context* – i.e. the Greek world-view, the conventions of performance, the historical facts – and then move on to *the plays themselves*, to see what the plays are *saying*. The form of Greek plays is inseparable from what they meant and mean.

(6) History can never be objective. As a way of establishing meaningful links between bits of data, we tell stories about the past, and those stories reflect how *we* see our own world. To describe the past is partly but not exclusively to describe ourselves. Theatre poses acute problems for the historian at the best of times because it is always finished and lost before anyone can put into words what it was. In order to create my personal picture of how Greek theatre *was*, I return unavoidably to the way Greek theatre has been performed in the twentieth century. Each modern performance embodies a new understanding of the past, and offers a new perspective. My sense of how things were in the past is informed by my sense of what theatre can do in the present, and my dreams of

what it might do. The theatrical culture which I inhabit is, if not a thriving one, at least a pluralist one, with no single dominant notion of how theatre ought to be, so it is easier for me than for a scholar a hundred years ago to weigh and evaluate different possibilities, and to probe the boundaries which separate modern practices from the radically different practices of the past.

(7) I share widespread contemporary embarrassment at the notion of 'great art' because I know that the aesthetic taste of one generation, class or culture is rarely shared by the next. I prefer to say that I admire Greek plays because they have so many possibilities. They can be handled as movement pieces, performance poetry or intellectual arguments. They confront themes like war, gender, democracy and the limits of materialism which seem to matter in the present. The unique qualities of Greek dramatic writing are bound up with the uniqueness of the Greek political experiment, which engaged the public as participants in rather than spectators of all public events.

(8) The true authors were the Athenian public. The conflicts and perplexities of some 30,000 men were articulated through a small number of writers and a rather larger number of performers. My shortest chapter is the one devoted to the handful of Athenians who served their city as dramatic poets, for I see theatre as a collaborative process. Without the skills of the performers and the emotional commitment of the spectators, the scripts that we now read could not have been written.

(9) It is an accident of history that our knowledge of Greek drama has been transmitted by words on papyrus, and not by the tomb paintings of the Egyptians, the picture writing of the Aztecs or the celluloid and magnetic tape of the twentieth century.

The first half of this book is devoted to modes of performance in classical Athens: (1) the recounting of stories or 'myths'; (2) ceremonies devoted to the gods; (3) speeches designed to sway an assembly towards the speaker's point of view; and (4) everyday life, with the particular example of how gender is performed. These modes of performance shape both the form and the content of Greek drama. Since theatre is a relationship between actors and spectators at one moment in time, I consider in chapter 5 the physical basis of that relationship. Chapter 6 is perhaps the core of the book, for the live and spectacular presence of the performer distinguishes theatre and dance from other artistic media. The fact

that theatre does not *need* writing is precisely what makes the writer an interesting figure to study in chapter 7. I finish by trying to unravel some of the issues that arise when performers *now* try to understand *their* theatre *then*.

CHAPTER 1

Myth

SUBJECT MATTER

Mythos

According to Aristotle – and we agree there – narrative is the soul of drama. (Brecht)[1]

For the philosopher Aristotle the life-spirit of a play was its *mythos* – a word we can variously translate as story, plot, narrative, myth or simply an act of speaking. I shall start this analysis of Greek theatre with its storytelling – the core skill that kept an audience on the front of its wooden seats through a long day. It is sometimes stated that Greek audiences knew the stories, and knew what was fated to happen. This is misleading. The myths of classical Greece were highly malleable, and the job of the dramatist was not to reproduce myths but to recreate them. Compared with today, there was more possibility of surprise for there were no reviews, no published texts, and plays were written for a one-off performance. There is also the simple fact that good theatre relies on suspense. The expert story-teller can hold a listener who has heard the tale many times before. Take this account of a scene by Euripides:

Remember how Merope in the tragedy raised her axe against her son because she mistook him for his own murderer. When she cries: 'This blow will cost you dearer than the one you gave!' what uproar she causes in the auditorium, lifting them to their feet in terror, in case she does the boy an injury before the old man can stop her.[2]

This may be a folk memory of the first performance. More likely it describes an effect regularly reproduced after the play had become a classic known to all, thanks to the skill of the dramatist and actors, and the quality of audience involvement.

Gods

The Greek term *mythos* covered a spectrum of meanings from a palpable falsehood to a story of deep symbolic and religious significance. The tragedians had at their disposal a stock of 'myths' or traditional story lines about gods and heroes, and a short introduction to these more-than-human beings is essential. The presence of the divine can be accepted, rationalized or simply eliminated in modern performance. In 1968 Richard Schechner's adaptation of *The Bacchae* challenged the audience to question their humanist assumptions and accept the divine. The actor playing the god Dionysos introduced himself by giving his own name:

> Good evening, I see you found your seats. My name is William Finley. I was born twenty-seven years ago and two months after my birth the hospital in which I was born burned to the ground. I've come here tonight for three important reasons. The first and most important of these is to announce my divinity. The second is to establish my rites and rituals. And the third is to be born, if you'll excuse me.

During the birth ritual, Finley continued his commentary:

> Now I noticed some untoward snickering when I announced the fact that I was a god. I realize that in 1968 it is hard to fathom the idea that gods walk the earth again. However, to say that I am not a god would be the same as saying that this is not a theatre . . . Now for those of you who believe what I just told you, that I am a god, you are going to have a terrific evening. The rest of you are in trouble.[3]

With this warning in mind, let us consider how the modern mind can relate to the Greek gods. At one extreme were the Olympians, whom we may consider the highest form of divine life, victors in a long process of natural selection, looking and behaving like humans, and residing – at least notionally – on top of Greece's highest mountain, Olympus. Then there were demons, like the Furies or Erinyes whom Aeschylus describes as black, tangled with snakes, eyes oozing blood.[4] These demons were of greater antiquity than the Olympians, and lived within the earth. It was a major innovation when Aeschylus asked human actors to impersonate creatures that could scarcely be imagined in any human form. At a further level of abstraction, forces such as Atê (blind destruction), Dikê (justice) and Ankanê (compulsion) could be imagined as semi-personal deities. The system was fluid enough to allow Euripides, for example, to stage creatures called Death and Madness – part divinities, part allegorical symbols.

There are different ways of understanding the Olympians. The simplest approach is biographical. Zeus, king of the gods, came to power at a certain point when he ousted the previous regime of Titans. He rules as lord of the manor alongside his wife Hera, and goes around fathering children upon the female tenants of his earthly estate. His underemployed children by different liaisons – Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Athene, Aphrodite, Dionysos, Hephaistos, Hermes – quarrel amongst themselves and create chaos by dabbling in human affairs. His siblings rule lesser estates: Hades the underworld, Poseidon the sea, Demeter the cornfields, Hestia the indoor world. It follows that we can also associate the Olympians with different aspects of space. Zeus rules the sky, his weapon is a bolt of lightning, and he fertilizes the female earth with rain. Artemis the huntress roams in the uncultivated wilderness. Hermes is concerned with movement across boundaries from place to place, whilst Dionysos dissolves boundaries, moving freely from drinking parties to wild mountain tops. This spatial analysis is more satisfactory than the biographical mode because it recognizes that the Greek gods were a means of describing the world and explaining it. The gods can also be understood as social and psychological projections. Female experience is associated with a series of goddesses – Hera: the frustrations of the married state; Athene: the asexual world of domestic production; Hestia: seclusion in the home; Aphrodite: the exercise of erotic attraction; Demeter: reproduction; Artemis: the wildness of adolescence, the pain, fertility and taboos associated with menstruation. Male experience incorporates Zeus as power, Hermes as travel, Ares as fighting, Dionysos as drinking, Hephaistos as manual labour, Apollo as artistic and intellectual endeavour. Of course, male aspects impinge upon women, and vice versa. Each god has a complex series of attributes which resonate in many directions.

A comparison between Apollo and Dionysos will illustrate some of these complexities. Dionysos shared Apollo's holiest shrine at Delphi, and reigned in the four winter months whilst Apollo retreated to a sunnier clime. Apollo is associated with light, thus intellectual enlightenment, and far-sighted prophecy. Dionysos the wine-god is associated with darkness, with nocturnal drinking bouts, and the loss of mental clarity in moments of collective emotion, with the loss of boundaries around the self experienced in a crowd, and the hiding of self behind a theatrical mask. Apollo makes music with the measured chords of his lyre, whilst the instrument of Dionysos is

the haunting double oboe which can whip up wild dances. The worshippers of Apollo tend to be male, those of Dionysos more often female. In the field of performance, Apollo is responsible for epic poetry, which is to say the disciplined recitation of a classic text by a single performer. Dionysos is responsible for theatre, with its collective performance, its freedom of bodily expression, its unpredictable content, its anarchic assemblage of different verse forms, and its projection of a moral void.

It is often said that there can be no such thing as a Christian tragedy. Christianity posits that God is good and does not contradict himself; hence in every moral dilemma there is ultimately a right and wrong. In Greek religion, the gods have no morality, and represent irreconcilable opposites. In Greek tragedy conflict amongst humans is often mirrored by conflict amongst the gods: for example, Artemis (chastity) opposes Aphrodite (sexual fulfilment) in the *Hippolytus*. These gods are powerful and have to be honoured, but they have no concern with the criteria of right and wrong. They usually like their worshippers to be pure, not physically polluted by a crime like murder, but that is not the same thing as morality, a sense developed by human beings alone. Tragedy allowed Greeks to extrapolate from the anarchy of their religion a viable moral code.

Modern readers are often shocked by the cruelty or (in comedy) the ridiculousness of Greek gods, and wonder if the author responsible was an atheist or a blasphemer. This is to miss the point, for the only true crime against the Greek gods was to dishonour them by denying their power. Although modern criticism has yielded techniques for rationalizing the Greek gods, we must remember that gods are, ultimately, gods and it is their nature to resist explanation.

Translators of Greek plays have a serious problem with the gods, since they are forced in some measure to standardize a host of variant names. The translator's dilemma is whether to strip much of the religious content from the text so it becomes comprehensible, or to lace the text with beautiful and exotic names that create an aura of numinous mystery. Directors also have to take a stance. David Rudkin and Ron Daniels opted for rationalism in their version of the *Hippolytus* presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1978, a period much less sympathetic to mysticism than 1968. Rudkin argued: 'It is quite natural for man to make human form of the abstracts and intangibles he feels in his experience.' Thus 'Greek tragedy does not deal with mythology at all. It deals with the world.'

Figure 1 Dionysos in *The Frogs* wearing the lion skin of Herakles. The slave Xanthias carries his baggage. From a vase of about 375–350 BC.

Rudkin arrives at a troubling paradox: 'we can only approach the original "Greek" experience of the play by expunging all that is culture-specifically Greek in it.'[5] The assumption that Artemis and Aphrodite are merely aspects of psychological experience resulted in a certain quality of performance. Juliet Stevenson played both roles, a still, human presence in the middle of an intimate theatre, voicing thoughts. By contrast, Silviu Purcarete's Romanian production which visited England in 1995 offered an Artemis who paced restlessly about the stage swathed in bandages from head to toe with no eyes visible. Here was a figure that could not be explained in any rational terms, barely human, with a menace that suggested the power of a totalitarian regime.[6]

Heroes

Whilst gods hover on the margins of Greek tragedy, the plots focus upon heroes, men and women of a distant time that can neither be

called myth nor history. The Greeks knew that the heroes existed not only from innumerable tales, but also because they could see the vestiges of their palaces built of gigantic boulders, and the grave mounds beneath which they were buried. It was felt that such ancestors could exert some power upon their descendants, so heroes were often worshipped at these graves. The difference between heroes and gods was that gods live for ever. Euripides in his play *Orestes* shows Apollo transforming Helen of Troy at death into a star – but this is not the same thing as living forever, for as a star Helen can no longer intervene in human affairs. The unique instance of a hero who successfully became a god is Herakles. As a hero, this man of incomparable strength is at the centre of two surviving plays; as a god, he makes a brief appearance in the resolution of *Philoctetes*, and in *Alcestis* he straddles both categories, fighting a god in order to save the heroine.

The plays that survive are dominated by three story cycles. (1) The war against Troy: two brothers, Agamemnon, king of Argos and Menelaus, king of Sparta, lead a Greek expedition to Troy on the Turkish coast, where they fight to recapture Helen, wife of Menelaus. After a siege of ten years, the Greeks destroy the city amidst scenes of much brutality. (2) The Orestes story: the same Agamemnon returns to the city of Argos, where his wife Clytaemnestra has taken up with another man. Clytaemnestra murders her husband in his bath, and in punishment is murdered by her vengeful son Orestes, who is aided and abetted by her daughter Electra. (3) The Oedipus story: in the city of Thebes Oedipus, having unknowingly killed his father, unknowingly fathers four children upon his mother. The curse of Oedipus destroys the next generation. His two sons fall out, and one leads an army from Argos to lay siege to Thebes, where the pair kill each other in single combat. These three story cycles, containing two wars and every permutation of intrafamilial conflict, provided the material for hundreds of plays. There were always new points of view to be found, new shifts of sympathy, new interpretations of motive, and new moral dilemmas. Although other story cycles were used – cycles associated with figures like Herakles, Theseus founder of Athens, Cadmus founder of Thebes and Jason the Argonaut, the number of stories was finite. Dramatists kept returning to the same core narratives.

The dramatists found infinite variety in these stories through superimposing the present upon the template of the past. In theory