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978-0-521-83456-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre

Edited by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

MARIANNE McDONALD AND J. MICHAEL WALTON

Most books on drama are about plays and playwrights. This is a book about theatre and, though the words ‘drama’ (from the Greek *drama*, ‘something done’) and ‘theatre’ (from *theatron*, ‘a seeing-place’ and *theama*, ‘a show’) both imply a performance dimension, it is the circumstances of presentation rather than the material that was presented that serve as its focus. Tragedy and comedy are part of a big-city art, their history defined for the most part by what happened in the capitals to which major artists have always tended to gravitate; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Marlowe from Canterbury, Shakespeare from Stratford, Beaumont from Leicestershire, Fletcher from Sussex and Wycherley from Shrewsbury, all naturally heading for London; Lully from Florence to Paris; Monteverdi from Cremona to Venice; modern American playwrights to New York or Los Angeles.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander were all Athenian bred, but of the Latin playwrights whose work has survived, Plautus was a native of Umbria, Terence born in Africa and Seneca in Spain. They all ended up living in Rome. Herodas, the writer of Greek ‘mimes’, a few of which have survived in written form, is the exception, living and working in Alexandria, but in the third century BC, when Herodas flourished, Alexandria was as much a cultural centre as was Athens or Rome.

The justification for this second Companion, following the earlier *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by Patricia Easterling (1997), is only in part that this new one looks at comedy as well as tragedy, the Roman world as well as the Greek. More important is an acknowledgment that, however much the surviving written playtexts became the foundation of the western repertoire, they form only one element of a broad theatrical tradition. The emphasis here is less on texts than on occasion, on the nature of a performance culture, on the religious thought underpinning every aspect of life from the rules of warfare to the governance and order of society; all of this reflected through the theatre of the times. This is the unifying theme for the first eight essays under the subheading ‘Text in Context’.

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Complementary is ‘The Nature of Performance’, eight further essays that look at the detail and organization of ancient performances, from playing-places to properties, costume to costs, ending with what happened to the theatrical repertoire when confronted with newer performance media. Running throughout the book is an awareness that, alongside the recorded and recordable history, there thrived a consistent but variable tradition of presentation: of storytelling, mockery and subversion; of dance, music and mask; of religious, secular and political expression; and, eventually, mechanical ingenuity, the arena and gladiatorial combat.

Much of this was so ingrained in society as to be barely noticed in its own time; some was of the humblest nature, entertainment that happened on street-corners or in tiny villages. It might be amateur or professional but was, for the most part, both and neither, being tied into communities of all sizes in which the sense of holiday or carnival found its expression and where those with some presentational skill might demonstrate it for anybody who turned up to watch or listen.

This, then, is a book that draws attention more to the circumstances of performance than to the substance of its most lasting monument, the classical plays. The nature of the occasion stands alongside the organization that sustained that occasion. The expectations of audiences are balanced against the motives of those who promoted them. There is very little on translation or on modern stage revival, except to enlighten the nature of the original experience and the difference that modern technology has imposed on performance and on historical research. However, attention may be drawn to the various translations in the Bibliography, most of which show an awareness of staging in introductions or through stage directions, including, in the case of Seneca, whether or not his plays were created with a staged performance in mind.

The biggest difficulty in deciding what should or should not be included was the sheer timescale involved. At a conservative estimate the history of ancient Greek and Roman theatre goes back a thousand years before Aeschylus was born, to the Minoan cultures of Crete and Thera. The further terminus, or at least a convenient staging post, is identified with the banning of all forms of theatrical performance in the late seventh century of the Christian era. Such is the range covered by **Mark Griffith** in his synoptic opening essay where he searches for the origins of tragedy and comedy, alongside recitation, dance and music, and traces their development through to Roman pantomime and beyond.

**Richard P. Martin** looks at the way in which a sense of ‘theatre’ was a persistent feature of so many aspects of Greek and Roman society, from sport to rhetoric, political systems to the *Ludi*, the Roman games where the

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emperors consolidated power by giving the people the increasingly savage diversion they demanded. **Fritz Graf** investigates the relationship between mortals and immortals in polytheistic societies, and shows how religious observance formed a framework of dramatic presentation, with gods as characters in dramatic performance as they had been in the Homeric epics. **Jon Hesk** also makes comparisons between the theatres of Greece and Italy, investigating the social and political aspects of both, and the way in which civic responsibilities in Athens impinged on the stage world of Rome as well as of Athens. **David Wiles** revisits Aristotle to look anew at the intentions of the *Poetics*, the most influential document from classical times on the form of later tragedy.

While these five concentrate mainly on tragedy from Aeschylus to Seneca, Old Comedy in Athens is looked at in detail by **Gonda Van Steen**, who dissects the mixture of fantasy and real life in Aristophanes, identifying how some of the same production issues fed into revivals in the Athens of the twentieth century. **Sander Goldberg** picks up where Van Steen leaves off and investigates the nature of New Comedy; the similarities and differences between the work of the Greek playwright Menander and the Roman adapters of Greek Middle and New Comedy, Plautus and Terence. **Hugh Denard** completes the first section by showing how the centre of attention moved outside the cities to the vast range of miscellaneous ‘popular’ entertainment, virtually none of which survives in any scripted form, but which was a prominent feature of small-town and country life.

The second half opens with **Richard Green** assessing the place of theatre within a visual culture and evaluating the evidence of decoration and artefacts in deciphering what ancient performances might actually have looked like. **Rush Rehm** deciphers what is known about the conduct and organization of festivals and how they differed as a background for play production in Athens and Rome. **Richard Beacham** tackles theatre architecture, making a strong case for his reconstruction of the temporary theatres in wood which have not survived, as well as the magnificent stone monuments which can still be found in varying states of preservation throughout the Greek and Roman worlds. Choreographer and director **Yana Zarifi** reflects on the importance of dance and the significance of the Chorus in modes of presentation, from references within the Homeric epics, via Greek tragedy and comedy, to the Roman pantomime. **Gregory McCart**’s essay follows naturally from here, investigating, again with a practitioner’s perspective, the use of masks in ancient theatre and how, in an area that is much disputed, working with them today may throw light on ancient conventions. Stage mechanics and external effects, including costume, are scrutinized by **Graham Ley** in his chapter on the ‘nuts and bolts’ of ancient performance, where he notes how

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many of those involved with the theatre process were ‘makers’ of some kind. **J. Michael Walton** looks at ‘commodity’, the questions of costs and management, patronage and sponsorship which lie behind any theatrical enterprise. The book concludes with **Marianne McDonald** elaborating on how performance priorities have been refined and redefined when a story from classical myth is dramatized in a new medium, opera, radio, television or film.

Many of these essays manage to cover a greater span of time than that between the birth of Christ and the date of this publication. The total period of more than two thousand years begins and ends in what used to be thought of as ‘dark ages’, but on which historians are shedding more and more light. With the best will in the world, confining two thousand years of social history within a single book is less like squeezing a quart into a pint pot than pouring a barrel into a thimble. The temptation is to impose a pattern where there is none, or to assume continuity or evolution amongst a mass of activity which is both geographically and historically pure accident. As untenable is to treat the theatre of fifth-century BC Athens as the golden age from which whatever happened in the next millennium was a decline. Though many a classicist might agree, the theatre historian cannot afford to be so judgemental.

One factor that makes the task both easier and more difficult is that ‘theatre’ under our broad definition is both under-recorded and underestimated. There was apparently a history of the theatre, probably the first such, written in Greek by King Juba of Mauritania some time during the reign of Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome. Unfortunately, like all the rest of Juba’s historical work, that book failed to survive. The study of the theatre of Greece and Italy has always been hampered, less by the small selection of surviving playtexts than by the fact that the circumstances of performance survive in haphazard fashion via a mixture of anecdote, reminiscence and incidental reference. The remains of many Roman and some Greek theatres are there to be seen and walked around; there are pictures on vases which appear to reflect theatrical performance; there are incidental comments from lawyers, architects, poets, grammarians and even scholiasts, those shadowy figures who at some time in the transmission of manuscripts added their own comments on what they thought was happening in a scene or how it was originally staged. There are precious few eyewitness accounts from the perspective of an audience member, still fewer from that of a player. There is one treatise on dance by Lucian (second century AD), but no ‘dances’; there is virtually no music, though music seems to be one of the few elements that links the performances from earliest Greece to latest Rome.

What we are left with is a vast amount of miscellaneous information, anything from the contradictory and implausible ‘Lives’ of the playwrights to unlikely anecdotes written hundreds of years after the time they claim to

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illuminate: but gossip has its uses. The value of much of this information resides not in its historical accuracy but in its incidental detail. There is a story recorded in the ‘Life of Aeschylus’ that, when the playwright introduced the Chorus of Furies, pell-mell, in his *Eumenides*, women had miscarriages and children collapsed from shock. This carries no more conviction than any other urban myth exaggerated over time by constant embellishment. As an indication of how *Eumenides* was first staged it is negligible. On the other hand, it is a story that makes little sense of any kind were not some women and children permitted at some time to see plays by Aeschylus.

Julius Pollux, who tells the same story about the impact of the Furies, includes in his *Onomasticon*, an Encyclopedia written in the second century AD, a description of the Greek theatre building giving special significance to various pieces of stage machinery, including *periaktoi*, prismatic scenic units which could revolve to give different indications of stage location. He also writes that:

There could also be in a theatre a wheeled platform (*ekkuklêma*), crane (*mêchanê*), reveal (*exôstra*), lookout post (*skopê*) . . . lightning-machine (*keraunoskopeion*), thunder-machine (*bronteion*), god-platform (*theologeion*), lift (*geranos*), backdrops (*katablêmata*), semicircle (*hêmikuklion*), revolve (*stropheion*), semi-revolve (*hêmistropheion*), Charon’s steps (*charônioi klimakes*) and trapdoors (*anapiesmata*). (Pollux, 4.127)

He goes into some detail of how thunder- and lightning- machines worked, the one involving pebbles being rolled into a copper pot, the other a rapidly swivelling *periaktos*.

Some of the stage devices to be found described in Pollux are simple enough means of offering reveals and tableaux, theatrical devices involving space, dimension or basic semiotics which were to become part of the vocabulary of the stage from the Renaissance onwards.

There are few scholars who believe that many of these scenic units and machines would have been available to Aeschylus or Sophocles. That is not the point. The point is that, at some time during the period covered here, there *were* such devices, in some sort of theatre, somewhere, which Pollux identifies as ‘the Greek theatre’. Those ancient ‘machines’ were to prove a major influence on the elaborate staging for the court masque and for baroque opera. Pollux lived and wrote at the end of the second century AD. There had already been some sort of ‘Greek theatre’ in existence for seven hundred years. Seven hundred years is a vast period of time during which every aspect of theatre may have altered to reflect major changes in society.

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Vitruvius, in his *De Architectura*, written about 16–13 BC, included a whole section (Book V) on Greek and Roman theatres, complete with figure drawings and details over acoustics. Again, Vitruvius is vague about when or what he means by ‘a Greek theatre’. But the man was an architect. At some time there were what he identifies as typical ‘Greek theatres’, and of the dimensions he identifies. New research projects based on 3D imaging are demonstrating how modern technology can offer insights into issues of space and sightline, and transforming long-held suppositions about theatre buildings.

Aristotle was the nearest thing to a theatre historian in Athens, probably still alive (just) when one of the Greek comedians (Menander) was writing. Much of what has been gleaned about the theatre of the fifth century BC, and earlier, is filtered through Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The *Poetics* is a philosopher’s treatise, which incidentally includes some information about Aristotle’s understanding of the development of tragedy. Intriguing document though the *Poetics* may be, it is frustratingly vague about what actually happened in the theatre of his own time, when so much of the classical repertoire was still being performed in revival. Nothing that Aristotle says, in fact, suggests that he ever attended the theatre. If he did, he saw no reason to give an impression of the experience, or much detail of how a play was presented. A much better impression comes from within the plays, especially those of the comic writer Aristophanes.

Though many of the texts, comedy and tragedy, that have come down to us look to have undergone alteration at various points in their transmission, they still offer much of the best evidence for how the plays were actually performed in their original productions. In the passage quoted earlier, Julius Pollux talks about the *mêchanê*, the stage-crane, the means of transporting a character, usually a god, from stage level to the *theologeion*, the ‘god-platform’. If the evidence for the stage machine were none other than Pollux there might have been real doubt over whether the fifth-century Athenian audience knew of, or would have tolerated, such an artificial contraption. But when Trygaeus, the farmer frustrated by war in Aristophanes’ *Peace* (421 BC), has fattened up a dung-beetle so that he can fly to heaven to discover what has happened to the goddess of Peace, Aristophanes provides us with the nearest we will get to proof. Trygaeus climbs aboard his ‘beetle’ and takes off, admiring the view of the Piraeus from his aerial perspective before calling out:

*ô mêchanopoie, proseche ton noun, hês eme  
êdê strephei ti pneuma peri ton omphalon,  
kei mê phulaxeî, chortasô ton kantharon.*

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Oy, you working the crane [*mêchanopoeie*], keep your mind on the job.  
 The wind's already whistling round my navel.  
 If you're not careful I'm going to give the dung-beetle a meal.  
(*Peace* 173–5)

The *mêchanopoiōs* was clearly the ‘flyman’, or stage-manager. We have to be wary of using the language of plays as a means of defining stage action but, especially in comedy, Aristophanes’ sense of metatheatre assumes an audience who are thoroughly familiar, and comfortable, with having their attention drawn to the stage-world where the action takes place. The term *theos ex mêchanês*, ‘god from the machine’, came to be used figuratively for any form of divine (or unexpected but authoritative) intervention to resolve an awkward situation; it is known better in its Latin translation as *deus ex machina*.

The *mêchanê* may have been a peculiarly unreal stage machine, but it helps to confirm that nobody in ancient Greece or Rome was expecting ‘naturalism’. The term ‘realistic’ has to be used guardedly when discussing the plays of Euripides, Menander, Plautus or Terence. Realism is relative. It also applies differently to the mechanics of performance and the ‘truthfulness’ of situation or character. Another Aristophanes play, *Frogs*, first performed in Athens at the Lenaea of 405 BC, soon after the deaths of first Euripides, then Sophocles, features Dionysus, the god of the theatre, so upset about the consequences for the city that he decides to go down to Hades to try and bring back Euripides.

When he finally gets down there he discovers that Aeschylus (who had died in 456 BC, all of sixty years by the time of *Frogs*) is also in contention. A competition is set up to decide which is the better playwright. The two dead tragedians compete over language, morality, prologues, and finally over whose lines are the weightier, judged by their speaking of them onto a pair of scales.

They also argue over the virtues of ‘realism’, Aeschylus accusing Euripides of lowering the tone of tragedy by introducing realistic characters. The wonderful thing about this farrago of nonsense is that Aristophanes offers the nearest, indeed the only, example we have of contemporary dramatic criticism, albeit strained through the mesh of comic invention. Eventually Aeschylus is declared the winner by Dionysus, not because he is the better playwright, but because he offers the better advice over helping the city of Athens to survive. He returns to earth with Dionysus to ‘save the city and educate the fools’. The danger was real enough. The Peloponnesian War, which had dragged on for twenty-five years since 431, was entering its final stage. Only a year later the Spartans forced the Athenians into submission.



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That this ‘stage’ Aeschylus, in a comedy written by Aristophanes, should condemn a ‘stage’ Euripides for his ‘realism’ merely confirms the impression given by the plays that Euripides’ approach to drama was comparatively realistic. Indeed there are at least two sequences in Euripides’ plays (the recognition scene in *Electra* and the allocation of defenders in *Phoenician Women*) where the younger playwright appears to draw attention to equivalent scenes in Aeschylus (*Libation-Bearers* and *Seven Against Thebes*) in which he parodies Aeschylus’ dramatic method as old-fashioned and ‘unrealistic’.

In a similar but different way, the ordinary Athenians who inhabit the Athens of Menander’s plays, and from there the mix-and-match world of Plautus and Terence, are still recognizable as the everyday characters in Aristophanes. The difference is that the cast of an Aristophanes comedy also includes real Athenians (the politician Cleon, the philosopher Socrates, the playwright Euripides three times in the only eleven plays to have survived), animals, personifications, demigods and Olympian deities.

The ‘realistic’ characters of Euripides, Menander or Terence still acted in masks, a form that requires presentational acting and a physical body-language of gesture (*cheironomia*). There is still little direct evidence on the nature of masked acting in the ancient world and about the restriction on the number of actors, likely in tragedy, but much less plausible, if not impossible, in Old and New Comedy. Audiences for later tragedy and comedy may have been more able to recognize characters with whom they could directly empathize or even identify. They were still looking at an art of the unreal. Realism did come to the classical theatre, but to the theatre of the Roman arena, where criminals might be publicly tortured or executed. In the theatres of imperial Rome, differently armed gladiators fought to the death; men and women, many for their faith or for minor misdemeanours, sometimes under the guise of a contrived dramatic situation, were tortured and killed in all manner of hideous ways. It was all theatre, the real theatre of life and death, albeit decorated with the trappings of an artificial entertainment.

Formal Greek and Roman drama has an intrinsic value as part of a body of literature from the past revealing, as other forms do not, how people lived and what they thought. It has an equally important function as a stimulus to modern practitioners to renew the plays in modern productions; or to modern writers to return to the world of myth for its flexibility and its power of parable.

This is a vast topic and some readers will inevitably be disappointed by what has been omitted through lack of space. Hopefully, what is included contributes to a kaleidoscopic picture of the importance of the ‘performative’



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as a central element within the two great European cultures of the ancient world.

Members of the Hellenistic guilds, actors who plied their trade as professionals in a Greek-speaking world that stretched from the Black Sea to the Middle East, to North Africa and Sicily, performed from a repertoire that originated in fifth-century Athens. One such made a series of dedications in his home town of Tegea, a little to the south of Argos. He gives thanks for victories in the City Dionysia at Athens (where he played in Euripides' *Orestes*); at Delphi (where he played in Euripides' *Heracles* and the *Antaeus* of Arcestratus); also at Argos (in *Heracles* and the *Archelaus* of Euripides); Dodona (*Archelaus* and the *Achilles* of Chaerephon): eighty-eight prizes in various Greek cities; and a prize for boxing at the Ptolemaia in Alexandria. That was the career profile of a Hellenistic entertainer. Eventually, in the third century AD, the Artists' Guilds and the Guild of Athletes joined up to form a single trade union in what Pickard-Cambridge described as 'a fusion of the Old Vic and the Football League'.<sup>1</sup>

It is the history of all these players that we celebrate here, the host of supplementary figures from mimes to mask-makers, alongside the famous names. They all had a part to play in the cultures in which they lived and died. They all added, in however minor a manner, to the sum of theatrical understanding on which our modern entertainment industries are based.

## NOTE

1. A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, second ed., rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 301.

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PART ONE

Text in context