

OLGA TAXIDOU. *Greek Tragedy and Modernist Performance: Hellenism as Theatricality*.
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Olga Taxidou situates her *Greek Tragedy and Modernist Performance* within the New Modernist Studies (4), a critical turn that, in departing from a more narrow temporal and geographical focus and from strictly textual perspectives, has broadened the scope of the field to include modernist practices in performance. Not only is the book a step forward in charting the centrality of performance in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernist experiments, but it also posits the importance of such engagements with modernism for the reformulation of twentieth-century theatre and performance. Greek tragedy, Taxidou argues, is the dominant locus of these modernist attempts, as it represents the ideal form with which to critique the past and renew the future.

There are two principal traits that Taxidou shows to be recurrent in modernist encounters with Greek tragedy. The first is their engagement with what Taxidou calls “Hellenism” rather than the more textually and philologically oriented term “classicism.” By referring to the Hellenistic period (323 BCE–31 BCE) and, more specifically, to the period’s literary endeavours towards the preservation, tidying, and recasting of the models belonging to the so-called “classical” period, Hellenism functions as an “umbrella term” (3) that encapsulates the imitative as well as novel and renewing features that characterise the modernist engagements with Greek tragedy discussed in the book.

The second recurrent trait in modernist experiments with Greek tragedy is their particular digestion and reconceptualization of the model of Greek theatre and performance. Taxidou argues that modernism’s use of Greek tragedy recuperates in positive terms Plato’s concern about theatre’s political and educational power, that is, his worry that Athens may in fact become—or indeed, in his time already had become—a “theatrocracy.” Taxidou argues that this Platonic political and educational power afforded to performance is central to the modernist approach to Greek tragedy.

Modernism's engagements with Greek tragedy are typically defined by a double gesture towards both past and future, as is evident in Taxidou's account of Isadora Duncan's and Gordon Craig's experiments with the genre (chapter two). If, on the one hand, these artists reach back to the Greeks—Duncan with her sculptural "ekphrasis" and choral dance, and Craig with his *Black Figures* (1907-1914) and *Übermarionette*—they are far from reproducing the "'sham-Greek' aesthetic of the 19th century" (Craig quoted in Taxidou, 33). Instead, their attempts aim to renew rather than reconstruct the model they have in mind. Duncan's "physicalised ekphrasis" (40) is both an homage to Nietzsche and a model for Craig's Platonic world of puppets and automata. Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* constitutes a sort of rite of passage for modernist artists engaging with Greek tragedy throughout the twentieth century, as the German philosopher offers a vision of Greece that contrasts with nineteenth-century classicism: it is Nietzsche's Dionysiac, barbaric, "primitive" Greece, with its particular emphasis on the role of the chorus, which inspires and influences many twentieth-century stage productions of Greek drama.

Translations of and textual engagements with Greek tragedy are the subject of chapters three and four. Chapter three retraces the works of T.S. Eliot (particularly *Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935); Ezra Pound (his translations of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, 1954, and *Electra*, 1949); W. B. Yeats (especially his translations of the Oedipus plays); and the Berlin Dada (*Simply Classical! An Oresteia with a happy ending*, 1919). Chapter four centres on H.D.'s engagements with Greek tragedy, particularly her translations of Euripides' plays. Taxidou offers readers a new view of such engagements with Greek tragedy by positing performance, or performability, as being at their very centre. These translations and adaptations of Greek drama are presented as an attempt to reformulate "poetic drama" in theatrical terms. In other words, these works "gesture towards a new modernist relationship between the word, the body of the actor, and the theatrical event in general" (65). In the case of H.D., Taxidou's theatrical lens proves particularly helpful, as she analyses H.D.'s Euripidean translations in light of her involvement as an actor in the POOL Group's film experiments of the 1930s as well as Gertrude Stein's theory of the landscape play.

Bertolt Brecht and his Epic Theatre are the subject of the final chapter. Here, Taxidou discusses Brecht's re-functionalisation of Plato's negative emphasis on the political dimension of performance, as well as his theorisation of the epic actor as drawn from the rhapsode in Plato's *Ion*. As Taxidou argues, Brecht's *gestus* is both a development of Plato's rhapsode as well as an homage to Greek theatre and Greek tragedy via the German philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin's concept of "caesura." Literally meaning the pause between words in a metrical foot, Hölderlin expands the idea of the caesura into a philosophical concept that pinpoints a moment of violence, a rupture, in tragedy. Not only does Hölderlin's caesura resonate with Brecht's conceptualisation of theatre as a series of interruptions rather than linear narratives, but it also metaphorically embodies a Brechtian *gestus*, insofar as the *gestus* reflects Brecht's interruption of Greek tragedy. While looking back at the Greek theatre and Greek tragic model and form, Brecht creates a rupture which invites new ways of thinking of performance. Taxidou's book concludes by looking briefly at Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, in which Greek tragedy is once again at the centre of a dance back and forth in time, as it represents both the problem of and the cure for theatre's renewal.

Overall, this book is a useful resource for those who are interested in the intersections among modernism, Greek tragedy, and performance. It builds on recent scholarship in performance reception theory by bringing a modernist lens into the picture, while also adding to modernist studies by locating Greek tragedy as a central concern of important twentieth-century modernist artists.

Keywords

Modernism, performance, Greek theatre, translation

Abstract

The book charts the importance of performance to late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernist experiments, while also demonstrating the centrality of Greek tragedy to such experiments. For these artists, Greek theatre, and Greek tragedy in particular, represents the ideal model and form with which to critique the past and renew the future.