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Materialisms Old and New

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In 1820, an impoverished Scottish crofter-turned-stonemason, Alexander MacDonald, moved to Aberdeen. There was a good supply of raw local stone in the form of granite, which could be made into matte-surfaced mantelpieces, paving stones and funeral monuments. But Alexander was frustrated because neither he nor anyone else could work out how to give the gritty local stone a sheen and polish equivalent to that which could be given to marble. The breakthrough came when, in 1829, he read about an exhibition at the new British Museum of ancient sculptures from Egypt, some of them from the Hellenistic period. They had been brought to Britain by the colorful adventurer Giovanni Belzoni, a former fairground strongman turned explorer.[1] MacDonald traveled all the way to London to visit the exhibition and was astonished to see that the luminous statues made of granite—even those with rounded surfaces—were highly polished. The Egyptians and Ptolemies, mysteriously, had known how to do what no stonemason had done ever since. MacDonald set about trying to reproduce the lost art, but polishing by hand was just far too arduous and time-consuming to be remotely practicable. He did manage to crack the problem of the rounded surfaces by using a wheel and lathes turned simultaneously by two workers. But since everything had to be done by manual labor, it was far too slow to be viable except for tiny pieces, and even they took days. The point was that the Ptolemies had enormous armies of slaves who could be kept at the lathe for entire lifetimes.[2]

The breakthrough came when MacDonald's neighbor, who ran a comb-making factory, let him use power from his newly installed steam engine. With the aid of what still seemed like the near-miraculous power of steam, which drove the cutting and polishing machinery, monumental polished granite artefacts became feasible again for the first time since the slave-owning Ptolemies. The granite industry of Aberdeen was now unstoppable. Polished, shiny granite

gravestones became the rage, and ever bigger monuments and edifices were built, constructed out of granite exported from Aberdeen and exported all over the British Empire. In London alone, think of Waterloo Bridge, or the terraces of the Houses of Parliament, or the reddish granite of the fountains in Trafalgar Square.

The granite of the Ptolemaic statues was therefore instrumental in altering the mode of granite production, the visual appearance of British imperial cities, and in due course the entire economy of north-eastern Scotland. It is a textbook example of "vital" or "unruly" matter, as the new materialists would label it, effecting its own changes in the world. But is it a story which can be told without thinking about the labor crystallized in the material? New materialism is a label applied to a range of intellectual approaches across several disciplines, including philosophy, anthropology, political science, environmental studies and cultural/literary studies. The ancient Greeks saw aesthetic beauty more predominantly in sensuous apprehension of matter than of form, as James I. Porter has dazzlingly demonstrated,[3] and so, *prima facie*, classicists should welcome any application of new materialism to ancient literary texts. The present volume therefore explores the interpretative potential of new materialism when applied to a particular type of literature: classical Greek tragedy. My own essay, however, has a single aim. It argues that one aspect of new materialist aesthetic analysis that classicists would do well to resist is its retreat from, indeed often refutation of the relationship between *work* and matter—what Marxists call the labor theory of value. In doing so it expresses a similar to Jennifer Cotter's excellent critique of new materialism from the perspective of an expert on Marxist philosophy.[4] My argument then leads into some thoughts on the potential value of Marxist theory in the analysis of Greek tragedy, and its lamentable underdevelopment hitherto. I here confine my discussion mostly to inanimate matter, although much of what follows could usefully inform treatments of the materiality of the body, vocal delivery and human/animal interactions, such as sacrifice, in literature.

The word "materialism" presents its own specific problem for scholars because it shares with other philosophical terms such as "hedonism" the characteristic that it currently means different things inside and outside the academy. And the two things it designates are not only very different, but often perceived as virtually antithetical. Materialism, to at least ninety per cent of people speaking English and many other languages, means an attitude to life which prioritizes the pleasurable consumption of material goods along with the accumulation of possessions and of the wealth which can provide them. It is a word often used pejoratively by people who prioritize other life goals, which they perceive as

somehow more profound than superficial engagement with material goods: these may be appreciation of the arts, intellectual development, spirituality, or social justice. In popular political language, materialism is broadly denigrated by "left-wing" individuals as a characteristic of "right-wing," conservative, pro-capitalist ones.

Yet, within the academy, since the early eighteenth century, materialism has meant a scientific and/or philosophical system, traceable back to Democritus, often atheistic and socially progressive, which asserts the primacy of matter. In opposition to Platonic idealism, it regards what we call "god," "mind," "spirit," "consciousness," "transcendence" and "ideas" as fundamentally products of, and caused, conditioned or informed by material or physical agencies. By the late 1880s, the word materialism, even unqualified by an adjective, began to be identified, more and more exclusively, with the revolutionary political philosophy of Karl Marx (whose doctoral thesis was on the subject of ancient atomism[5]) and Friedrich Engels. This was a result of the coining of the labels "historical materialism" and "dialectical materialism" to describe their historical and philosophical methods of enquiry.[6] Marx and Engels situated humans as organic beings in constant interaction with other organisms and their material environment; they envisaged the nature of human consciousness as culturally and historically relative precisely because it is informed by these interactions, especially those related to the production of goods necessary to survival. In most of human history such production has entailed an enormous amount of human labor, marked by conflict between poor laborers and such non-laborers as grew rich on their productivity. These different groups can be defined according to their relationship to the production process, that is, according to their objective "class." The word "materialist" in this technical, philosophical sense, partially overlapping with the term "Marxist," is often found doing the opposite ideological work from that which the "consumerist materialism" does. It is used by "right-wingers," often religious conservatives, to attack egalitarians and socialists: it is derogated as a "dogma" which reduces the status of the human individual to that of a "mechanical automaton."[7]

This bifurcated signification of the word "materialism" and its use in adversarial polemic should alert us to the possibility that the emergence of the new materialism is doing ideological work of a political nature, however hidden any agenda may be. Many of the most prominent new materialists, for example Maurizia Boscagli in *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism*, actually go out of their way to position their arguments as a rebuttal, or at least adversarial rival, of Marxist cultural theory.[8] Jane Bennett has openly and explicitly

differentiated her own understanding of the M-word from that of intellectuals working in the historical and dialectal materialist traditions.

> I want to emphasize, even over-emphasize, the contributions of non-human forces . . . in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. What counts as the material of vital materialism? Is it only human labor and the socioeconomic entities made by men and women using raw materials?[9]

Bennett's intellectual wriggling here is complicated. Human subjects need to be downgraded in our appreciation of matter. Matter and objects have a vitality, instrumentality and, it is implied, an almost conscious agency of their own. We as humans are narcissists, cosmic imperialists who by imposing "subject"/ "object" hierarchies somehow oppress inorganic elements, minerals, liquids, and gases as well as organic flora and fauna, at least if we do not acknowledge their immanence and vitality. And "human labor" and "socio-economic entities" have, Bennett implies, unfairly monopolized the attention we humans pay to matter. She continues:

> Or is materiality more potent than that? How can political theory do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in every event and every stabilization? Is there a form of theory that can acknowledge a certain "thing-power," that is, the irreducibility of objects to the human meanings or agendas they also embody?[10]

I stress at this point that I have no objection to questioning anthropocentrism. The ecological crisis which we *homines sapientes* have inflicted on Planet Earth demands that we change our exploitative and destructive behavior towards all the "things," animate and inanimate, with which we share the globe and the universe.[11] But there is a fundamental flaw in Bennett's premise that this exploitative and destructive history is connected with thinking about matter *exclusively* (her word is "only") in terms of labor and socio-economics.

It needs to be countered that we have never yet paid remotely *enough* attention to the relationship between material things, human labor and socio-economics. We can surely *add* some of the vocabulary of "vital materialism" to our interpretive toolkit when working within any academic discipline. But the idea that scholars of culture have already done a good enough job of thinking about labor is preposterous. Only a scholar working in a country like the USA, where about 20 percent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture or industry, the other 80 percent operating at a more or less extreme degree of alienation from the processes of material production, could possibly hold such an opinion. In some

European countries the productive workers now constitute less than five percent of the working population. But try claiming that scholars are too focused on labor and the socio-economy to a citizen of Zambia or Burundi, where the percentage of the workforce laboring in agriculture or industry is 91 percent and 96 percent respectively. Globally, more than 40 percent of the workforce still works in farming of one kind and another, often at a subsistence level, with scarcely any machinery, and in abject poverty.[12] Every year still sees an *increase* in the total number of humans involved in industrial labor, just as it did a quarter of a century ago.[13]

Bennett's aversion to labor-centered discussions of matter reminds me of the case of Joseph Wright, the illiterate workhouse boy and wool sorter who eventually rose through an enormous autodidactic effort in his teens and twenties to become professor of comparative philology at Oxford, but remained proud of his origins all his life. He married a young woman from a much more privileged background whom he met when she was studying at Lady Margaret Hall. She recalled a rare occasion on which he had rebuked her. She had facetiously complained that doing philology, and consulting big dictionaries, required excessive "manual labor." Wright quietly pointed out that "manual labor" meant working, for example with a wheelbarrow.[14]

One reason for introducing these global and cross-class perspectives on new materialists' suspicion and suppression of the role of labor and socio-economics in thinking about matter is partly irritation at the feeling expressed by some of them that they are occupying higher moral and more radical political ground than the rest of us anthropocentric narcissists. But the other is that the society which produced ancient Greek drama was, in terms of its relations of production, far more similar to modern Zambia and Burundi than it is to modern England or North America. If we are fully to appreciate the role of materials and objects in a play written in the fifth century BCE in Athens, then we surely would be well advised to ask how those materials were thought about in that society as well as their vitality or thing-power.

It takes three days for a Bangladeshi handloom weaver to produce a basic nine-foot rectangular sari. A prized Baluchuri sari with in-woven mythological scenes and animal and floral designs take a master weaver twenty-five working days. These time estimates are of course additional to the cultivation of the silkworms or cotton plants from which the raw fibers are taken, and the labor-intensive processes required to turn these raw fibers into workable filaments. If you have not witnessed or participated in such time-consuming work, or at least tried seriously to reconstruct the experience in imagination, you cannot

possibly appreciate a handmade sari's real ontological status as well as material worth in the eyes of the farmer, fuller or weaver. If you buy your new dress online from a department store for a sum which it takes you one hour to earn, you will never appreciate at a sensual and emotional level the financial and talismanic value of the most elaborately woven sari made of the finest quality silk. But nor will you be able to understand what Jason's new bride thinks Medea's gesture means when she sends her as a gift an unusually beautiful patterned robe which she says was given to her family by the Sun-God, Helios himself; in Olympian religion and its related mythical narratives, the objects requiring the most labor to produce them are represented as being made by and for gods, as virtual impossibilities in the world of human production. Maximal human effort is conceived as somehow *theios*, divine. The sheer value of Medea's donated robe (not to mention the coronet cunningly crafted from gold, to which attention is paid by the rich variety of vocabulary used to describe it) underlines the apparent magnanimity of her recognition of the princess's new married status.[15]

The "thingness" of this particular object is in my view wholly inseparable from the thousands of silkworms or sheep or cotton bushes or flax plants which produced them, but also from the several human working hands through which the fibers passed and the hundreds of hours expended on the labor. Human labor is crystallized in matter, but so, often, are the actual remains of previously existing flora and fauna. As Frederick Robertson said in a lecture on poetry to working men at the London Mechanics' Institute in 1852, "we apply to domestic use slabs of marble, unconscious almost that they contain the petrifactions of innumerable former lives."[16] The thousands of tons of marble which crown the Athenian Acropolis were hacked out Mount Pentelicon, shaped into rough blocks or cylinders, dragged seventeen kilometres across Attica by human and animal power and then somehow, through technology still mysterious even to specialist archaeologists, elevated to the top of the rock. This was all before the lengthy task of turning them into fluted columns and exquisite sculptures to the designs of Pheidias had even begun. But that perfect white marble itself consisted of millions of compacted sea-shells deposited when Attica lay at the bottom of an ocean, and then cooked, recrystallized and compressed not once but on two separate occasions in the unimaginable volcanic furnaces of our protolithic planet. The Athenians (or rather, their slaves) put extraordinary labor into installing matter that had been made out of living sea creatures on the top of their citadel. No wonder Poseidon had almost as much right to the sanctuary there as olive-bestowing Athena.

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Silk and wood are made from animals and linen and cotton from plants. It is only by thinking about how objects were laboriously produced that we can properly appreciate their "thingness" in ancient culture. Those made out of organic living matter rather than metal ore, for example, were often held to inherit their voice and agency from their sources: wood, the ultimate *hulē* that gave the Greeks the philosophical word for matter in Aristotle, was once a tree, as the nurse in *Medea* reminds us in the opening lines of her famous prologue about the Argo and the woods of Mount Pelion. It was a Pelion pine that provided the plank that made the ship that sailed the thousand nautical mile round-trip to the mouth of the river Phasis and back, before surviving the play to land on Jason's head and kill him at some point in the future (1386–87). In a sense, Jason was violently killed by a tree that lived on a mountain in his homeland. The audience probably envisaged this as taking place in Poseidon's sanctuary at the Isthmus,[17] where later authors say that Jason dedicated the Argo to the sea-god on arrival in Corinth[18] : the Roman sophist Favorinus claimed that the Argo was dedicated after a victory in a boat race there.[19] Favorinus even preserves a couplet by Orpheus, ventriloquizing the ship herself, which Jason is said to have carved on her timber: "I am the good ship Argo, to god by Jason devoted,/Victor in Isthmian Games, crowned with Nemean pine."[20]

A similar agency can be seen in Euripides in the case of Ion's broom, which he addresses in the second-person as a fellow worker, and which has been irrigated when still a living branch by water droplets possessing agency.[21] The address occurs while he himself labors to keep the Delphic sanctuary clean (112–20):

ἄγ', ὦ νεηθαλὲς ὦ
καλλίστας προπόλευμα δά-
  φνας, ἃ τὰν Φοίβου θυμέλαν (115)
σαίρεις ὑπὸ ναοῖς,
κάπων ἐξ ἀθανάτων,
ἵνα δρόσοι τέγγουσ' ἱεραί,
ῥοὰν ἀέναον
παγᾶν ἐκπροϊεῖσαι,
μυρσίνας ἱερὰν φόβαν[22] (120)

Come, new-grown, caring bough, of the loveliest laurel, you who sweep the altar beneath the temple of Apollo; you are from the immortal gardens, where sacred drops keep moist the holy myrtle leaves, sending forth an ever-flowing stream.

Speaking ships and sentient bows were once inhabited by tree-spirits; musical instruments made out of animal hide or shells, like the lyres in Sophocles'

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Ichneutae ("Trackers") or the lost *Thamyris* plays of both him and Aeschylus, retain the numinous voice of fauna.[23] It is unbelievably easy for those of us who are not only not polytheists but alienated from material production, because we do not make things but buy them imported from distant parts of the planet, to forget these fundamental features of ancient practice and belief.

The labor theory of value was not invented by Marx and Engels, but developed by them from the classical economics of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who sought to understand how commodities acquired prices relative to one another in early industrial capitalism. The notion that there was unfairness and exploitation locked into the relationship between laborers and land- or factory-owners was recognised even by Ricardo, a trenchant advocate of capitalism and profiteering. With the rare exceptions of certain kinds of luxury goods—fine art, for example—where the market value can these days often bear little relationship to the amount of labor expended to produce them, typically the exchangeable value of products varies relative to the amount of labor used in getting them into the marketplace. And hourly labor can itself be costed by adding up everything required to keep an individual at work, such as food, clothing and shelter, and dividing it by the number of hours worked. There are other theories of value which developed as capitalism becomes more complicated and which emphasize other factors than labor, especially demand and supply, for example the "marginal theory of value." But none has ever explained so satisfactorily the relationship between value of commodities and income distribution across classes. When it comes to pre-industrial societies, the sheer scale of the man- and woman-hours, let alone the labor of pack horses, donkeys and ploughing cattle needed to keep up the supply of even basic commodities, a scale that in antiquity meant slavery was economically unavoidable, would have produced relationships between humans, animals and material objects almost unimaginably different to our own.

The material consumption that is most emphasized in extant Greek tragedy is the use of textiles dyed with sea-purple to line the ceremonial walkway on the approach to the palace when Agamemnon, in his Aeschylean name-play, returns from Troy. Much has been written about this scene; my own interpretation stressed the way that Clytemnestra wants to show Agamemnon, in public, to be a man whose vanity prompts him to assume the privileges of an Oriental monarch—more specifically, of the Persian King, who was by court protocol required to have his feet perpetually separated from the earth by either a carpet or a footstool.[24] It is widely known that purple dye was costly, and it is not scholarly news that this adds to the sense of wasteful decadence which Clytemnestra persuades Agamemnon to find even publicly acceptable.

But often this routine observation is made too swiftly without thinking through the exceptional and electrifying tactile value of purple textiles to Aeschylus' audience. Remember that it takes a handloom weaver three days to produce a single sari out of threads which have already required a great deal of labor, and multiple that by the length of fabric required to cover a substantial part of the *skênê* and probably *orchêstra* of the theater of Dionysus. But the visible fabric represents only a miniscule amount of the labor concretized in Clytemnestra's carpet. A substantial amount of dye was required to stain several yards of cloth. It has been estimated that to obtain just 1.4 grams of dye (the amount needed to dye the *trim* of a single robe), as many as twelve thousand shellfish had to be culled alive, and the vein containing their purplish mucus extracted and drained (if they died before processing the liquid drained away and disappeared immediately). The procedure could only take place in late winter or early spring, before the egg-laying season, when the mucus became depleted. To make the renowned Tyrian purple, quantities of the mucus of two different types of murex were combined. The smaller species needed to be painstakingly crushed and steeped in industrial vats, and the ensuing pulp gradually distilled by heating and evaporation until the correct density was achieved. The larger species was only found in deep water and had to be located by divers and dredged up in baskets from many fathoms below the surface. The vein of every larger murex needed to be delicately extracted by hand. No wonder that the Phoenicians' most famous export was, quite literally, worth more than its weight in gold.[25]

Clytemnestra wants her husband's dusty, travel-weary feet, in a showy display of gross class insensitivity, to trample on and potentially damage the fruits of thousands of hours of labor expended by humans of a lower social echelon than the royal family of Argos. Now, I do not want to be found guilty of insisting on "the irreducibility" of Clytemnestra's textiles to "to the human meanings or agendas they also embody," as Bennett defines the crime of (her limited concept of) the old materialist. I can certainly find some sympathy for the millions of shellfish who were crushed or cut open alive by the Phoenician dye industry. But the shockwave which must have gone round the theater of Dionysus at this arrogant exhibition was about much more than "thing-power"; or, to put it another way, this very powerful "thing" has acquired that exceptional "power" through the almost inconceivable amount of work that has gone into creating its glowing, vibrant spectacle.

Totemic objects and gifts in Greek tragedy are usually of exceptional value as the fruits of exceptional amounts of labor. They are also usually destructive. The

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most famous of all in antiquity was the staggeringly beautiful but wholly injurious golden necklace of Harmonia. It featured in several lost but important tragedies, for example Euripides' *Alcmaeon in Psophis*, and destroyed several generations of the Theban and Argive royal houses. All descriptions in ancient authors emphasize the superb craftsmanship; it was inlaid with jewels and shaped in the form of two serpents with a complicated clasp.[26] I am tempted to say that thinking about this kind of artefact, so instrumental in literature, might be productively informed by an interdisciplinary foray into the fascinating field of archaeometallurgy, established in the 1970s.[27] Learning how discrete metals were mined, produced, and consumed in pre-industrial societies, their instrumentality in changing human experience, and their highly variable value across time and space, can only benefit our understanding of their presence in works of literature.

Meditating upon the concentrated labor crystallized in a significant necklace, coronet or shield might encourage a Marxist critic even to see the destruction which such objects wreak as a symbolic metastasis, into the language of myth and dramatic plotting, of the conflicted relations of production underlying their elaborate and painstaking manufacture. Conflict, Eris, was after all the mother of Ponos (Labor, Toil, or Suffering).[28] The necklace of Harmonia was made by the only proletarian Olympian (Hephaestus) out of a grudge against the way he had been cuckolded by other Olympians more patrician in both appearance and occupation. Harmonia's necklace, Clytemnestra's carpet and Medea's bridal gown have somehow absorbed, and express on an aesthetic level of ideology, the social violence required to run a system where the leisure of a few was made possible by the coerced labor of so many.

A labor-oriented perspective can prove especially fruitful in the case of theater scholarship, on account of the multiple agents involved in the creation of any theatrical performance. In a fine analysis of the box-office hit musical *A Chorus Line*,[29] Christin Essin has used "old" materialism to explore the work's revelation and critique of the labor involved in theater-making, simultaneously visible and unseen. She shows how the musical emphasizes the shared efforts of the backstage technicians, and the endlessly rehearsed onstage performers, while exposing its genre's typical erasure of the physical labor behind such shows. Unlike most musicals, it draws attention "back to the local, lived conditions of Broadway employees," in this case "during the economic recession of the mid–1970s, during which producers mounted fewer shows, translating into fewer jobs in an already competitive labor market."[30] Essin's analysis contains revealing interviews with electricians and lighting technicians

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and immediately suggests a way of amplifying the avalanche of work on metatheatrical aspects of ancient Greek drama which was published in and since the late 1990s.[31] Drawing attention to the way that certain scenes draw attention to their own status as performance became a rather wearisomely favorite form of scholarly interpretation at that time, especially of tragedy. A way of refreshing this approach would be to ask how tragic performances either reveal or erase the actuality of the thousands of hours of labor which had contributed to the final performance.

There may have been neither electricians nor lighting designers at the City Dionysia, but, to perform a tragic tetralogy, twelve chorusmen had to train hard for several months, under the supervision of their *chorodidaskalos*. Three actors had to learn hundreds of lines from their papyrus parts which would have taken days to transcribe from the master text.[32] Musicians needed to learn and practice their accompanying melodies and rhythms. Plaster-infused rags had to be pressed into concave moulds to create forty-eight masks for the chorusmen alone, and, in the case of the *Oresteia*, at least nineteen further masks for the actors.[33] The same numbers apply to the costumes, made of fabrics which had already taken intensive labor to produce. Props needed to be supplied, wooden flats painted, and stage hands trained until their movements synchronized perfectly with the action and dialogue. It is hardly surprising that the physical labor behind these extraordinary shows sometimes peeps through authorial creative decisions, for example in *Hippolytus*, where the work of both Choruses (huntsmen and laundresses) is integral to the thematic development of the plot. It is even less surprising that the labor, indeed slave labor (olive farming, treading grapes, tending flocks, hauling heavy objects, hammering, fishing) is one of the primary mythical functions of satyrs, the theatrer-god's male entourage, nor that tragic performances routinely ended with the exhausted chorusmen literally assuming the identity of Dionysus's workhands.[34]

Thinking about value derived from concentrated labor in a society where relations of production where every bit as conflicted as they are today, can indeed help us appreciate the power of material things in ancient Greek drama. Perhaps the fashion for new materialism can be turned into an opportunity not to heap further ritual opprobrium on Marxist theory but instead to re-evaluate some other ideas inherent in it which might enrich classicists' repertoire of interpretive strategies now. After all, the kneejerk derision of Marxist aesthetics which characterized the cold war is no longer compulsory within the western Academy. Marxist aesthetics did take some time to achieve sophistication, because there was an aboriginal gap in classical Marxist theory when it comes to aesthetics, for

the simple reason that Marx, Engels and their immediate successors were too busy addressing class struggle on the economic and political planes to work out a fully-fledged theory of art. In the Soviet bloc, there was an early flowering of brilliant work marrying socio-linguistics to a historically materialist approach to literature evidenced in the work of scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin, who engaged deeply with classical texts, especially the ancient novel and Menippean satire, and Olga Freidenberg, another novel specialist. Sadly, this radical synthesis of materialism, formalism and linguistics was all too soon displaced by the problematic and inflexible doctrines of socialist realism.[35] But sophisticated models of reading literature with a dialectical materialist approach were in due course developed by a succession of brilliant western Marxist thinkers and Marxism-influenced literary theorists, including (to name only a few of the most famous) György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Christopher Caudwell, Ernst Bloch, Sebastiano Timpanaro, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, and Terry Eagleton.

Among classicists, however, the disciplinary chasm yawning at institutional and curricular levels between ancient history and classical philology led to a curious situation in which Marxism achieved a degree of respectability among practitioners of the former while facing almost total ignorance (at best) and derision among the latter. Well-known classicists whose Marxism was relatively public knowledge included the Irish Benjamin Farrington, an expert in the history of science, whose best known work was *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece: Four Studies in the Social Relations of Thought*,[36] the Scottish byzantinist Robert Browning, and English Polybius specialist F.W. Walbank.[37] The exclusion of literature and aesthetics from Marxist analysis within Classics was painfully apparent in the 1975 *Arethusa* volume edited by J.P. Sullivan, entitled *Marxism and the Classics*[38]; its contents would have been more appropriately packaged as *Marxism and Ancient History*, since the articles offered purely historical perspectives on history, slavery, and revolution. These included one by David Konstan, who has however subsequently used Marxist ideas, mostly in a subterranean and non-explicit way, to illuminate ancient literary texts, above all in *Greek Comedy and Ideology*.[39] The sole exception in the 1975 collection was a short piece by Heinrich von Staden on Marx's own famous but truncated discussion of Greek visual art.[40] There was silence on the topic of literary aesthetics, a pattern repeated in the extended bibliographical section.

The lack of hermeneutic equipment Marxist classicists possessed to address aesthetic questions was made even more painfully apparent in Geoffrey de Ste Croix's pioneering *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*.[41] The book

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includes chapter titles informed by the traditional Communist tripartite division of the arenas in which class struggle is manifested—political, economic and ideological. The chapter "the Class struggle on the Ideological Plane," one of the shortest in the book, glances at Thersites in the *Iliad* and expresses regret that de Ste Croix cannot use Aristophanes (one is tempted to ask him to explain more clearly why not!) But otherwise de Ste. Croix doggedly uses ancient texts to document "reality"—Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Sallust, Strabo, the Christian Fathers. He makes no attempt to decode the ideological work done by imaginative fictions as recorded in tragedy, lyric, elegy, epic, epyllion, epigram or the novel.

So, who have been the equivalents of Raymond Williams, Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton in the sphere of Classics? Maverick Australian Marxist Jack Lindsay held pioneering opinions on the ideological work done by ancient mime and fiction, and worked hard to draw attention to ancient literature which focused on quotidian and lowlife elements in ancient society.[42] But it was easy for establishment scholars to keep him away from mainstream scholarship because he never held an academic position. British communist George Thomson pioneered an approach to Greek literature based on ritual anthropology, especially in *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*[43], which was influential in the eastern bloc. His best work, in my view, was however on the relationship between the invention of coinage and early philosophy, and the connection between metrical forms and collective labor.[44] A few brave Italian Hellenists, notably Vincenzo Citti, Vincenzo di Benedetto and Alessandro Lami, followed their compatriot Gramsci's lead and worked hard to demonstrate how classical texts reflected and produced the hegemonic ideological structures of the classical city.[45] In France, the work of Vernant, and to a lesser extent Vidal-Naquet, fused a typically French "anti-humanist" Marxism with Althusserian structuralism in their pioneering readings of Greek myth, thought and literature.[46]

In the anglophone world, however, there was an almost deafening silence until the publication of Peter W. Rose's *Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth: Ideology and Literary Form in Ancient Greece*. It is no coincidence that this sophisticated Marxist study came out in 1992, three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, rather than before. Rose, whose career had suffered on account of his socialist politics, had earlier faced considerable problems when he approached publishers. It was the intervention of David Konstan, then at Cornell, which led to the book's acceptance by Cornell University Press. I agitated until I was allowed to review the book for *The Classical Review*, and stand by everything I wrote at the time:

> This book represents an exciting breakthrough in theoretical approaches to ancient literature. It provides, at last, a reliable and substantial study in English of ancient literature from an explicitly Marxist perspective. The most useful chapter is undoubtedly the lengthy Introduction, "Marxism and the Classics," in which Rose lucidly explains his theoretical position. It is a sophisticated amalgam of twentieth-century "Western" Marxist insights, concepts and arguments, all of which are familiar to scholars of later literatures, but which remain embarrassingly beyond the parameters of mainstream classical scholarship. From Gramsci R. adopts the concept of "hegemonic discourse," from Bakhtin (whom he classes as "Marxist" although many would appropriate him to formalism) his "politics of forms"—a conviction that the conventions of literary form carry an ideologically loaded message inextricable from "content," from Althusser a Marxist "historicizing" of Freudian psychoanalytical theory, and above all from Fredric Jameson, the bearer to an Anglophone readership of "all the insights of the Frankfurt School," the notion of a Marxist "double hermeneutic" . . . Literature is no crude "reflection" of contemporary society or simple weapon in the ideological armory of the ruling class. It is a form of cultural production aesthetically realizing by a process of mediation, problematization and distortion—a process conditioned by innumerable factors such as the class outlook of the poet, his relationship to the ruling class, and the formal dictates of his genre—a history of unceasing social struggle, contradiction, and dialogue.[47]

In the *Oresteia*, for example, argues Rose, the trilogic form itself expresses the dialectical assimilation of the past into the present, in the conversion of the Erinyes in the third play into their opposites, the Eumenides, and that *Philoctetes* mediates the contradictions between a backward-looking image of the inherited excellence of the archaic aristocrat and an affirmation of Neoptolemus's consciously chosen concern for another human being against established authority and the promise of social prestige.

That review concluded with my hope that Rose's "careful scholarship, avoidance of jargon, and clarity of argument will open a debate amongst classicists about this most arbitrarily maligned and little understood of literary theories."[48] Sadly, this did not happen, except behind closed doors, although some of the central tools Rose had taken over from the non-classicist Marxist theorists have also been absorbed, either from his work or other Marx-influenced scholarly publications, by some of the best classical scholars over the last quarter century. They have somehow succeeded in entering the lifeblood of our profession. They have informed, in more or less submerged ways, some of our best new writing, especially about literary content. When scholars see *conflict* between ideological viewpoints, unravel the conflict by using a double

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hermeneutic, argue that the plots of New Comedy reinforce slavery and patriarchy, or point to the utopian tendency of many ancient fictions, they are, whether they know and acknowledge it or not, thinking in a Marxist way.[49]

Among classical scholars, however, literary form lags much further behind than content in terms of attempts to relate it to the socio-economic contexts which produced it. I discovered this when I was conducting the research for my endeavors to probe the relationship between the focus on work in the brutal, burlesque Greek *Ass* novel attributed to Lucian to its prose style, or between the generically unprecedented metrical variety of classical Athenian drama and the revolutionary but imperial democracy in which it was created and consumed.[50] There has been increasing interest in the tenacity of the epic form and its survival as prestige literature from Mycenean until late imperial times, yet to my knowledge no Classicist has ever even asked why long dactylic hexameter poems on elevated themes were chronologically coterminous with slavery, the fundamental mode of Mediterranean and Black Sea production in the Greek and Roman worlds throughout that era, let alone answered the question. Let us not abandon all the advantages of Marxist criticism by jettisoning it in favor of the "radical" (because dehumanized) ontology of matter which the new materialists are advocating. Let us refrain from such an arbitrary act of abandonment at least until such time as all the interpretive potentialities of reading artworks as highly concentrated crystallizations of endless interactions between humans' work and their natural and manmade environments have been much more fully explored.[51]

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