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## GREEK PLAYS IN GEORGIAN READING<sup>1</sup>

By EDITH HALL

### 1. The Context

If you lived in Reading in 1821, you might be tempted by the advertisement in your local newspaper for forthcoming attractions at the neighbourhood's commercial theatre. Should your taste encompass Greco-Roman themes, you might want to see 'Monsieur DECOUR, the renowned FRENCH HERCULES!! Who will perform . . . FEATS AND EVOLUTIONS . . .'. If you preferred oriental stunts, you would choose 'The Chinese JUGGLERS from the Court of Pekin!!' Such exhibitions are fairly typical of the popular entertainments enjoyed during the late Georgian era in any fast industrializing provincial town not too far from London. But what is surprising is that the same newspaper offers a review of a production in the town hall of Euripides' little known tragedy *Orestes*.<sup>2</sup>

It had been enacted in full costume by the students of Reading School. According to the reviewer (the local writer Mary Russell Mitford, fig. 1), it had greatly impressed its audience:

The correct and vivid representation of one of the Greek Tragedies is all the more interesting, because, from the days of Euripides until now, there have been no works of genius produced. . . A deep repose is shed over the grandeurs and mournful beauties of the spectacle. What a triumph . . . not in our opinion only, but in that of some of the most distinguished Greek scholars who were present. . . The enunciation of the sweetest of languages was in every instance so correct and clear, that the young performers seemed to be speaking their native tongue.

This *Orestes* is particularly surprising, because it is often assumed that the practice of performing ancient Greek plays in Britain began in earnest in around 1880. The late 1870s did indeed see the emergence of a newly vigorous Victorian Hellenism, manifested not only in the foundation of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies (1879), but in theatrical experiments with ancient Greek drama in Scotland and Oxford. These led directly to the foundation of regular performances of Greek plays at Cambridge University (1882), and at Bradfield School.<sup>3</sup> A craze for Greek plays in educational establishments

then took off in the Edwardian era, and survives amongst enthusiasts until the present day.

Yet educational performances of ancient drama in the British Isles have a much longer history, at least when it comes to plays in Latin. Enactment had been initiated as a pedagogical method by humanists on the continent in the fifteenth century, whence it had spread to England. University performances of ancient drama reached their first zenith in the sixteenth century: staples were Latin comedies such as Plautus' *Menaechmi* and Terence's *Adelphæ*. Seneca's tragic *Troades* also enjoyed an occasional performance; so, indeed, did Aristophanes' more 'moral' Greek comedies *Peace* and *Wealth*. But Greek tragedies were a rarity. There is very little evidence for Greek tragic drama being performed during the Renaissance on this side of the Channel in either Greek or in English: even the Latin translations of Euripides, popular on the continent, seem scarcely to have been performed in England.<sup>4</sup>

The Puritan closure of the theatres in the seventeenth century inaugurated a generalized anti-theatrical prejudice, which extended to the costumed performance of any plays whatever. Recitation was one thing, and performance quite another. The theatrical writer Westland Marston reports that as late as around 1830, his own father (a dissenting minister) had warmly praised his son's declamation of Sophocles' *Electra* at a school event in Grimsby, while harshly censoring any performances involving costume and scenery.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Richard Valpy, the headmaster of Reading School responsible for that singular *Orestes*, still needed to defend the propriety of acting plays at his school at all. They had met with moral objections, which he counters by claiming that theatricals have brought nothing but benefits to his Scholars.<sup>6</sup> Valpy was not alone: already in the eighteenth century there are occasional signs of an interest in actually performing ancient Greek tragedy in schools. Stanmore School, for example, seceded in the 1770s from nearby Harrow under the leadership of the Reverend Samuel Parr, and thereupon attempted a Greek play. Sophocles' *Œdipus Tyrannus* and *Trachinians* [*sic*] were enacted at Stanmore, minus all choruses, in 1775 and 1776 respectively. These productions benefitted from costumes donated by the incomparable actor-manager David Garrick of Drury Lane, and scenery furnished by Garrick's rival Samuel Foote, formerly of the Haymarket theatre, whose satirical wit had earned him the nickname of 'the English Aristophanes'. These productions created a mild flurry of interest amongst the literary men of the day, including the famous oriental scholar Sir William Jones.<sup>7</sup>

Parr justified his thespian experiments with Sophocles by invoking the authority of a pedagogical recommendation made by John Milton. In his treatise *Of Education*, addressed to the protestant Samuel Hartlib, Milton had advised that young men, once they had studied politics, law, and theology, would be ready for the *recitation* of the ancient historians, epic poems,<sup>8</sup>

and Attic tragedies of stateliest and most regal argument, with all the famous political orations . . . which, if they were not only read, but some of them got by memory, and solemnly pronounced with the right accent and grace, as might be taught, would endue them with the spirit and vigour of Demosthenes or Cicero, Euripides or Sophocles.

But Parr's immediate inspiration for a costumed performance was a conversation with William Jones about a Greek play put on earlier in the century in Ireland.<sup>9</sup> The organiser had been the schoolmaster Thomas Sheridan, who had taken up a position as headmaster at the Royal ('Free') School in Cavan. Sheridan (grandfather of the famous dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan) had connections with the theatre, and was from 1713 the intimate friend of Jonathan Swift. In 1720 Sheridan's senior pupils acted Euripides' *Hippolytus* in Greek, with an English prologue, in front of dignitaries including Archbishop King; at some point between then and 1726 a Sheridan production of a play by Sophocles was seen by the Lord Lieutenant.<sup>10</sup> It is not certain which Sophoclean tragedy Sheridan's youths performed, although one of his few literary productions – and the only one connected with an ancient Greek author – was a 1725 translation of *Philoctetes*, whose all-male cast might well have recommended itself to the master of a boys' school.<sup>11</sup>

Even Thomas Sheridan's *Hippolytus*, despite claims to the contrary, was not the earliest documented performance of Greek tragedy in Ireland or Britain: on Thursday 1st and Saturday 3rd April 1714, 'Mr Low's Scholars' had performed *Oedipus Tyrannus* in ancient Greek at Mile End Green in East London.<sup>12</sup> Nothing further seems to be known of either this production or of Mr Low, although I would hazard a guess that he was not unconnected with the Solomon Lowe whose work on Greek grammar, published in 1719, is housed in the Bodleian Library.

Yet none of the intriguing Mile End, Cavan, or Stanmore experiments seems to have been on anything like so ambitious a scale as Reading School's love affair with Greek tragedy. This was not confined to the *Orestes* of 1821. Reading witnessed a whole series of triennial Greek tragedies, by both Sophocles and Euripides, between 1806 and 1827. These have been scarcely investigated, since much of the information

lies in microfiches of contemporary newspapers and other obscure archives in Reading Public Library. Together with several accounts by individuals who had experienced one or more of the tragedies, these sources make it possible to build up a colourful picture of the Reading Greek play and its place in late Georgian society.

## 2. The Headmaster

The plays were entirely the brainchild of Reading School's domineering headmaster, Dr. Richard Valpy – a Liberal, even Whiggish, gentleman of terrifying stature. He was famous as the hardest flogger of his day (one of his nicknames was 'Dr. Wackerbach'), and he extended his use of physical violence to his daughters. He also had a zeal for the British navy which amounted to an obsession. The plays were performed in aid of naval charities: an *Amphitryon* in 1797, before Valpy turned to Greek tragedy, raised £130 for the dependents of the casualties of Lord Duncan's victory over the Dutch fleet.<sup>13</sup> His naval enthusiasm also led Valpy to institute the incongruous dancing of a hornpipe at the end of all his plays, and obstinately to refuse to abandon the tradition, thus bringing down the wrath of the press. One reviewer wrote,

We could have dispensed with the hornpipe . . . Dr. Valpy may well afford to break custom which his good taste must reject. His learning and talent do not require such adventitious aid.<sup>14</sup>

Despite or perhaps because of his eccentric and intimidating style, Valpy completely turned the school's fortunes around, transforming it over the course of half a century into one of the best schools in England. He was also responsible for some of the standard textbooks of the day, between 1809 and 1816 publishing grammars of both Greek and Latin and an *Elements of Mythology*, in addition to his widely used *Greek Delectus* of 1815.

The vigour and open-mindedness of his approach to education probably resulted from his background on the cusp between English and French culture: he was a Channel Islander, born into a wealthy Jersey family in 1754, and educated until he was fifteen at Valogues in Normandy (thereafter at schools in Southampton and Guildford, and Pembroke College, Oxford). There had long been a tradition of amateur theatricals in Jersey, and in the second half of the eighteenth century this little island received regular visits by both French and English compa-

nies.<sup>15</sup> Reading School retained a strong interest in the Channel Islands, deriving many of its pupils from them throughout Valpy's career.<sup>16</sup> Valpy, moreover, was impressed by French scholarship on the ancient theatre, enthusiastically advocating Pierre Brumoy's three-volume *Le Théâtre des Grecs*, published in 1730, to his literary friends.<sup>17</sup>

Some have said that the plays performed under Elizabeth I at Winchester were the inspiration behind Valpy's Greek plays.<sup>18</sup> The popular view of his contemporaries, however, was that he had consciously set out to compete with the ancient institution of the Latin comedy, performed at Westminster School. A comic account of Reading School written by an Old Boy (see below, section 5) portrays Dr. Valpy as choosing a Greek play on the ground that its language would trump Latin by virtue of its greater antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

'If . . . the W—r youths are able to do justice to the pure Latinity of the Roman poet, why should not my boys equally shine in reproducing upon the stage the Greek tragic Muse? I have it!' exclaimed the excited man, 'we will act a Greek play . . . and the world of letters shall shortly see that the youth of the Royal grammar-school of — can "fret their brief hour upon the stage" in a more ancient language than that of Rome.'

Yet the source of Valpy's idea of a Greek play was almost certainly direct communication with Samuel Parr, with whom he was a correspondent. Valpy can scarcely have failed to hear about the two Stanmore productions of Sophocles, especially since Parr 'often expressed a wish that his example had been followed in other seminaries':<sup>20</sup> it is significant that Valpy, like Parr, chose the *Oedipus Tyrannus* for his first attempt at a Greek tragic production (in 1806: see below).

Valpy was no stranger to the stage. As a youth he had been obsessed with the commercial theatre and had attempted to meet the great Garrick. His own adaptation of Shakespeare's *King John* had actually been performed in Covent Garden in 1803.<sup>21</sup> Abraham John Valpy, the second of the headmaster's numerous sons, was a printer who loved the classics, and edited the *Classical Journal* from 1810 until 1829;<sup>22</sup> but he was also responsible for *The New British Theatre*, which published unperformed serious contemporary dramas in a well-meaning but doomed attempt to persuade London theatre managers to raise the moral tone of their theatres.

Ever since Richard Valpy had been appointed by Reading Council to head Reading School in 1781, he had encouraged the theatrical talents of his Scholars (as he always called them). His theatrical aspirations were facilitated by the school's favoured status as recipient of a Triennial

Visitation by important members of Oxford University, an occasion which offered an excellent context for performances. The august Visitors were gently encouraged to fulfil their duty by emoluments arising out of an endowment made in 1640 by Reading's most famous son, Archbishop William Laud.<sup>23</sup> The Oxford Visitors who, Laud had decreed, should in perpetuity visit Reading School included the Vice-Chancellor, one of the Proctors, and the heads of several houses, notably St. John's, All Souls, and Magdalen.<sup>24</sup>

Valpy was quick to appreciate the value of the school's distinguished link with Oxford University, and to enhance the ceremonial aspect of the Visitations. English-language dramas had previously been performed at the school, since there is testimony to a *Cato* in 1731 (presumably Joseph Addison's famous tragedy of 1713).<sup>25</sup> Before 1790 Valpy encouraged the boys to perform puppet shows and poetic recitations to audiences known to have consisted of between three and four hundred.<sup>26</sup> But he soon began to organize English-language and Latin theatricals: the performances between 1790 and 1801 consisted of Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, history plays and *The Merchant of Venice*), alternating with Plautus.<sup>27</sup> The Latin plays at Reading were remembered by a Mary Sherwood, a pupil at the girls' school run in the old Reading Abbey by Madame and Monsieur St. Quentin: it speaks volumes for Dr. Valpy's liberal views on both the theatre and women that he regularly took all his Scholars to watch the French plays acted by the girls. Sherwood's cousin Thomas had been in a Valpy production of Plautus' *Aulularia* (1791), and had looked very fine 'as a young lady', with golden grasshoppers in his hair.<sup>28</sup>

But for the Triennial Visitation of 1806 Valpy attempted his first Greek play, an inspired innovation which was immeasurably to enhance the reputation of the school. Some of the Old Boys maintained 'a sort of club' which met at one of the principal Reading inns, and in triennial years they used to stay for days – even weeks – to help with rehearsals for the Greek play.<sup>29</sup> This became a fashionable highlight of the Reading calendar; one account vividly lists the notable local politicians, medics, doctors, and lawyers who were to be seen in the front row.<sup>30</sup> The Reading aldermen, complete with their furred gowns, were expected to attend *ex officio*.<sup>31</sup> The Triennial Visitation was traditionally concluded by a large banquet, provided by the Mayor: in 1827 it was described as a 'most sumptuous banquet at the Town-hall, at which turtle, venison, and every delicacy in season, with wine and fruits' were served to the

Reverend Visitors, the significant members of the borough, and 'upwards of a hundred gentlemen'.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. The Performances

The first Reading Greek tragedy was Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, performed in 1806; a booklet was published to accompany the production containing an adaptation of the 1759 English translation by Thomas Franklin. The cast list reveals that Valpy involved even his own smallest children: one little son played Jocasta's attendant and another Teiresias' boy.<sup>33</sup> Although the translation omits the choral odes, there was certainly a chorus of Thebans to be seen, since the eye-witness who wrote the review for the local newspaper attests to their 'majestic' gestures (this, incidentally, is probably the earliest surviving detailed description of a Greek tragedy in performance in Britain or in Ireland):<sup>34</sup>

The scene opens with a slow and dignified advance, while gentle and most plaintive sounds of music, from behind, interest the feelings of every spectator, which are progressively heightened, till the palace of Oedipus is discovered on one side, on the other a temple . . . some Thebans appear with boughs in their hands waving in majestic movements.

Of particular interest is the reference to that 'plaintive' music from backstage. One individual who remembered the so-called 'Valpeian plays' was William Darter, a local Reading man who had been involved in the musical accompaniment. He was a member of the symphony orchestra enlisted in the 1820s to accompany the plays, although besides the remark in the review above of *Oedipus Tyrannus* nothing is known of the music as early as 1806.

Darter recalls that in around 1819 the Amateur Musical Society had been established in the town under the direction of one Monsieur Venua; Darter himself had played the flute. The Society had about 150 members, who regularly gave performances in the Town Hall, thus naturally suggesting themselves as accompanists to plays performed there. Darter recalls that 'the orchestra consisted of all the local professors of music of any standing, as also of some amateurs', and lists the instruments as first and second violins, violas, cellos, double basses, flutes, and French horns.<sup>35</sup> This was quite a large ensemble and it is frustrating that we know little more about the music. The



implication seems to be that in the 1820s it was composed by Monsieur Venua, the leader and conductor, but unfortunately no trace of it seems to have survived.

We are on firmer ground when it comes to the performance venue, described in elegant detail in a slightly fictionalized account of the Reading Greek plays by Mary Russell Mitford (the friend of Dr. Valpy who had regularly been enlisted as newspaper reviewer), in her novel *Belford Regis* (see fig. 1 and below, section 4). This description is shown to be reliable by its correspondence with information drawn from factual sources, although the only available illustration is distinctly uninformative (fig. 2). The plays were put on in a large, elongated school-room, which at that time communicated at one end with the school-house (then in the civic heart of Reading), and at the other



1. Mary Russell Mitford. An engraving taken from a painting by John Lucas (1842).



2. Drawing of a character in a Reading Greek play, from Benjamin Bockett's account of the school (see n. 19).

opened 'into the entrance to the Town-hall, under which it was built'.<sup>36</sup> These buildings no longer exist, but it is clear that the town hall and the school were architecturally difficult to distinguish. At the school-house end of the performance hall was the stage, 'excellently fitted up with scenery and properties, and all the modern accessories of the drama'. There was a proscenium arch, 'just the right size, just a proper frame for the fine tragic pictures it so often represented', with a curtain that was raised at the beginning of performances.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult exactly to reconstruct the theatrical equipment, although Mitford's review of the 1821 *Orestes* suggests that the scenery was quite sophisticated, that torchlight was used imaginatively, and that characters *ex machina* had access to stage doors and some kind of device in which they could be elevated:<sup>38</sup>

Nothing could be more beautiful than the scene at Agamemnon's tomb – the sepulchre among the woods – the Choral women hanging tenderly over it . . . Orestes, holding the sword over the trembling Hermione . . . the torches casting a broad glare over the scene . . . and then the radiant [*sic*] vision of Apollo, at whose beck the scene opened, and discovered the bay, with Helen in a cloud, which the god also entered and began to ascend.

Three years after *Oedipus Tyrannus* Valpy attempted Euripides' *Alcestis*, a choice perhaps prompted, like Samuel Parr's *Trachinians*, by Milton's *Of Education*. For that treatise specifies *Trachiniae* and *Alcestis*

as representative of 'those tragedies . . . that treat of household matters', which Milton deemed suitable for study even by fairly young pupils.<sup>39</sup> The Reading Greek play was now becoming fashionable. Tickets of admission for the second and third nights of *Alcestis* were in so much demand that many hopefuls had to be refused, and 'during these representations', the town of Reading 'had a great influx of company, which proved so good an harvest to the inns', that beds were only 'with difficulty obtained'.<sup>40</sup> And well they might: after the last performance,

a Ball was given by the Members of the School Meeting to the ladies and gentlemen in the town and neighbourhood, who had attended the Plays, and contributed to the charitable object. The company was brilliant and numerous.

Indeed, on this occasion the Reading Greek play's significance was seen as lying as much in its status as high point in the Berkshire civic and social calendar as in the niceties of the production itself. We learn, nevertheless, that Mr Currie's *Alcestis* was outstandingly 'grand and mournful', that Mr. Fell's style of speaking the role of Admetus was remarkably 'animated' (the tone of the reviewer suggests that this was not entirely appropriate!), that Hercules was dressed in a real lionskin, and that there was beautifully painted scenery.

In 1812 there was a highly commended 'entertainment',<sup>41</sup> which may have consisted of Sophocles' *Antigone*.<sup>42</sup> In 1815 it is certain that the 'entertainment' comprised simple recitations from Homer and Euripides' *Medea*.<sup>43</sup> But in 1818 Valpy decided once again on a full-scale, costumed production of a tragedy, and chose one which has hardly ever been performed anywhere before or since. This was none other than Euripides' *Heracles*, one of the darkest and theatrically most flamboyant of all this dramatist's surviving works. Here Mitford's review for the first time attempts something approximating to literary criticism: the reader of the local newspaper is informed that the simple plot 'contains much striking situation, much of the fitness for representation, which distinguishes Euripides from his great rival, and much of the tender pathos, for which he is so justly celebrated'.<sup>44</sup> It was thus being discovered, by staged enactment, that Euripides' ancient reputation for working so well in the theatre (even better than Sophocles) was fully justified. The review commends the acting of Mr. Butler as Iris ('so beautiful and inexorable'), and especially the manner in which Mr. Harington as Heracles recovered from his 'trance' and represented 'the agony which seized him at the sight of the dead bodies'.

Encouraged by the success of *Heracles*, Valpy chose an equally

obscure play for 1821, the *Orestes* with which this article began: it proved a triumph, and a repeat performance was exhibited by popular demand.<sup>45</sup> *Orestes* has a large cast, and Valpy may have been pushed to find amongst his pupils sufficient numbers who could handle the demands of the ancient Greek: at any rate, no fewer than three roles, all with major speeches (Menelaus, Orestes, and the Argive messenger), were taken by the three brothers Palairt. The chorus consisted of three 'Argive ladies', although the lyric sections of this long play were somewhat cut. The published English translation, which in this year seems to have been enacted as a supplement to the Greek-language performances, is divided in the manner of a neo-classical tragedy into five acts.<sup>46</sup>

In 1824 Valpy's choice alighted once again on *Alcestis*. This performance made a strong visual impact, especially Mr. Frederick Bulley's painting-like beauty in the title role: when his veil was drawn at the end, 'the fixed composure of his features on which death seemed to have imprinted a calm and holy beauty, would have been a study for a Painter'. Little master Spankie's rendition of the role of Alcestis' son Eumelus was accomplished 'with the most captivating artlessness. It was very pleasant to hear so young a boy lisping Greek.'<sup>47</sup>

The last Reading Greek play was the *Hecuba* of 1827, twinned with *King Lear*. Mitford thought its star was Mr. Maul as Hecuba, who 'had all the hurried and agitated vehemence of a woman's revenge, the manner in which he rushed on the scene, holding in his hand the bloody dagger, will not soon be forgotten.'<sup>48</sup> By this time the Reading Greek play was perceived as something much more important than a 'dramatic curiosity', or so insisted Thomas Talfourd (fig. 3), an Old Boy by then working in London as theatre correspondent for the *New Monthly Magazine* (and later to become MP for Reading). He even persuaded the editor of this national organ to publish a review of the Reading *Hecuba* alongside his review of no less a theatrical event than Edmund Kean performing in one of his most lauded roles as Shylock at Covent Garden. Talfourd's letter to the editor survives in transcript: Talfourd tells him that the *Hecuba* had been 'a very singular and beautiful exhibition'.<sup>49</sup> In the review the youth who played Polyxena is said to have performed on a par with the best professional actors of the day; Talfourd emphasizes that the event had attracted 'many persons distinguished by classical and poetic tastes'.<sup>50</sup> This was not the first time that the Reading Greek play had been noticed by the press beyond



3. Thomas Talfourd by Daniel Maclise, c.1836.

Reading, for the *London Star* had reported the performances of both 1818 and 1821.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4. The Woman Writer

The most revealing picture of the Reading Greek play emerges from the various writings of the literary lady, Mary Russell Mitford, whose reviews for the local newspaper have already featured extensively in this article. Mitford was to become a friend of Elizabeth Barrett Browning; she was much involved with both drama and periodical literature ranging from more serious publications to the *Lady's Magazine*. Mitford's own works were informed by the Greek plays she

watched in her town hall; part of her own tragedy *Julian*, performed in London in 1823, was suggested to her by the Reading *Orestes* of 1821.<sup>52</sup> For much of her life she made her living by writing serialized fiction in what is now called the 'idyllic realist' vein; this was greatly admired at the time and has recently been enjoying a minor renaissance in departments of English literature. Mitford lived in or near Reading from 1802, when she was fifteen. In her fictionalized account of Reading life, *Belford Regis*, she creates a whole chapter out of an idealized and sentimental account of the Valpy productions, translated to 'Belford School'.<sup>53</sup> The tone is more humorous than that of her reviews, but the underlying sense of reverential awe for the good Doctor and for ancient Greek literature is identical.

Yet Mitford, like many female intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century,<sup>54</sup> had an ambivalent attitude toward the study of Greek. Few indeed were the women who had access to this most elite of languages, the jealously guarded badge of the well educated gentleman. Mitford loved the emotional power and humanity she perceived in Greek tragedy, and yet she had little but contempt for the narrow philology of contemporary scholars. In her youth one of the most formidable editors of Greek tragic texts had been Richard Porson, whose step-daughter was one of Mitford's childhood friends. She had been convinced that the great scholar 'cared little for the pathos' of Euripides 'or the vivid bits of truth and nature'. No, 'what he delighted in was his own new readings.'<sup>55</sup> An unappealing scholar whom Mitford modelled on Porson is to be found editing Euripides' *Troades* in her novel *Atherton* (1854).

This ambivalence towards Greek studies often leads Mitford to deprecating the female intellect in an ironic manner designed to imply the opposite. She writes in *Belford Regis*,

I must hasten to record, so far as an unlettered woman may achieve that presumptuous task, the triumphs of Sophocles and Euripides on the boards of Belford School.<sup>56</sup>

In the 'Introduction' to her own dramas, she remarks with some sarcasm on the paradox of her own role as newspaper reviewer of the Greek plays, a role on which Valpy had apparently insisted: 'For myself, as ignorant of Latin or Greek as the smuggest alderman or slimmest damsel present, I had my own share in the pageant.'<sup>57</sup> This remark reveals the social function of the Reading Greek plays as drawing cultural boundaries, through the ancient language, along the lines of class, education, and sex. On the one hand stood Valpy's Scholars and

the Oxford Visitors they were trying to impress, and on the other the womenfolk and local Reading citizens who constituted much of the audience. In private, moreover, Mitford's idealization of the Valpy plays is revealed as more than a little insincere. When writing informally to a female friend, she confesses that the much lauded 1821 *Orestes* was in fact terribly dull!<sup>58</sup>

I never yawned half so much in my life. The language is beautiful . . . but even that won't do for four hours, and it lasted little less. Everything that evening crept, drawled, 'trailed its slow length along'. The last time I was in that hall was at the election. O what a difference . . . ! The action [sc. in an election] is so much more interesting, the characters so much better developed and the speeches not half so long.

Yet neither Mitford's Greeklessness nor her low boredom threshold prevented her from realizing that *performing* a tragedy might cast a different light on (what we would call) issues of gender. She was particularly struck by the way that the sheer size of Hecuba's role undercuts the expressions of misogynist sentiment in the play: 'Woman-hater though Euripides were . . . yet in this tragedy he has paid a substantial compliment to the sex, by resting the whole of his interest on the female characters.'<sup>59</sup> Indeed, she was lost in admiration for the young Mr Maul in his realization of the role of Hecuba, for he

overcame the difficulties of the double disguise of age and sex, in a manner which would have done credit to the most experienced artist. We do not allude merely to the graceful and lady-like deportment . . . which stood him (really we had almost written *her*) in so much stead . . . that which appeared to us so striking was, that his very passions were feminine.<sup>60</sup>

Mitford is also particularly sensitive to the boys' impersonation of females (especially *Alcestis*, *Antigone*, and *Electra*), and in lighter vein describes the trials of theatrical transvestism: when performing female roles the actors' 'coarse red paws' had to be whitened with cold cream and chicken skin gloves,<sup>61</sup> and they were even put into stays!<sup>62</sup>

It is indeed remarkable that Valpy was so attracted to plays with strong female roles such as *Alcestis*, *Orestes*, and *Hecuba*. Mitford states that he refused to countenance a female-free production: the Doctor's boys, she says, were so famous for their women that she could never

prevail upon him to get up that masterpiece, 'Philoctetes', where pity and fear are moved almost as strongly as in 'Lear', not on account of the obvious objection of the physical suffering, but because there is no lady in the play.<sup>63</sup>

## 5. The Old Boys

Mitford apart, the most extensive source on the Reading Greek play is chapter viii of a humorous memoir of Reading School. It is the work of an alumnus by the name of B. B. Bockett, who had gone on to become an ordained minister in the Church of England. Bockett assumed the pseudonym 'Oliver Oldfellow', invented new names for the principal characters, and three decades after the last Reading Greek play published *Our School; or, Scrapes and Scrapes in Schoolboy Life*.<sup>64</sup>

Bockett had been chosen to play the role of the Phrygian slave in the *Orestes* of 1821 (this is confirmed by the programme), and his description of the preparations suggests a much more light-hearted operation than some of the other sources imply. Yet the tone may be a result of the anecdotal genre in which he is writing, or of the natural perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy. Bockett describes how Valpy's daughter had organized the wardrobe 'of our Grecian habiliments'; he particularly recalls the humiliation of being instructed by this frightening woman to try on his costume, an oriental 'splendour of spangles and bright glazed calico' (fig. 4).



4. Bockett and the wardrobe mistress.



The role of the Phrygian slave in *Orestes* requires the actor to run onto the stage in distraught panic. Bockett claims that Dr. Valpy favoured a primitive form of ‘method acting’, and recalls that his own ‘abject terror and crouching humility’ had been highly commended. He claims that he only achieved such emotional authenticity because Dr. Valpy (the renowned flogger going in Bockett’s memoir under the name of ‘Duodecimus’, i.e., ‘Twelve of the best’) used deliberately to hit him before his stage entrance (fig. 5):

With stealthy, cat-like tread did Duodecimus the crafty glide behind those scenes, and approaching the said Oliver at the *happy* moment, most unceremoniously did he deal him such a cuff or blow, as to draw forth *veritable* tears from the eyes of the now *really frightened* and agitated slave. Moreover, the same irresistible hand that dealt the blow proceeded, at the same moment, to hurry on to the stage the sufferer, who, thanks to that clever experiment whereby fact was substituted for fiction, did for once succeed in ‘bringing down the house’.

Bockett records with pride that his performance earned him an invitation to the Reading Corporation banquet. He drank until he passed out and had to be carried home from the feast, leaving his hat behind.

An important legacy of the Reading School play came in the form of the fellow Old Boy beside whom Bockett sat at that feast, Thomas Talfourd. Talfourd was the archetype of Tommy Traddles in the novel



5. Valpy prepares Bockett for his entrance.

*David Copperfield* written by his close friend Dickens. Prevented by his family's poverty from attending university, Talfourd idolized Dr. Valpy, and was deeply moved by the Greek plays (see above, section 3). Talfourd became by turns a notable theatre reviewer, radical lawyer and judge, MP for Reading, and contemporary dramatist, whose own Hellenizing tragedy *Ion* captivated Covent Garden in 1836 and enjoyed numerous revivals. *Ion* was undoubtedly Talfourd's direct response to Valpy's liberal politics and to the experience of Greek tragedy being enacted. The tragedy draws on both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Ion*, and in the decade of the Great Reform Act of 1832 is a blatant



6. The actor-manager of Covent Garden, William Macready, in Talfourd's *Ion* (1836).

appropriation of Greek tragedy to a contemporary political end: Ion proclaims a Republic and commits suicide on discovering his royal paternity. *Ion* created a great stir in its day, and remains significant in the history of British Hellenism as the last theatrical use of Greek tragedy for a radical political purpose until Gilbert Murray's productions of Euripides in the Edwardian era (fig. 6). After Valpy's death Talfourd prefixed a valedictory notice to the latest edition of *Ion*, singling out as Valpy's greatest pedagogical virtue his transmission to his pupils of love for Greek tragedies, 'those remains of antique beauty'. Valpy 'awakened within me', says Talfourd, 'the sense of classical grace', which was consolidated by 'the exquisite representation of Greek tragedy' which 'made its images vital'.<sup>65</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The 'vital images' provided by the Reading Greek play were unique from almost whatever perspective they are contemplated. The performances were surprising in the context of theatre history, because in the first two decades of the nineteenth century tragedy had retreated from the public stages of Britain almost altogether: serious writers had despaired of finding an outlet in the theatre. Valpy was perfectly aware of this, and saw himself as in some sense challenging the dearth of important drama in the commercial theatre. The Epilogue to the 1809 *Alcestis* includes a condemnation of current practices in London theatres.<sup>66</sup>

The Tragic Muse has left her Shakespeare's isle,  
And Comedy no longer deals her smile.  
Were Garrick now the London boards to try,  
His silver accents would in utterance die.

Choosing to produce a *Greek* play in 1806 was also in itself remarkable: in the wake of the French Revolution, when upper-class French radicals had adopted Grecian clothing, Greek drama remained at least mildly suspect. By the 1820s, partly as a result of the Greek War of Independence, Greek themes began to appear occasionally on the commercial stage, for example in Edward Fitzball's melodramatic *Antigone; or, the Theban Sister*, and Charles Horne's new opera *Dirce*, both first performed in 1821. But the Valpeian plays had anticipated this revival of Hellenic theatricals by fifteen years, and continued to offer 'authentic' recreations of Euripides throughout the 1820s.

Indeed, it is in their early drive for authenticity that the Reading plays were perhaps most distinctive. Mitford's 1821 review of *Orestes* contrasts the Westminster Latin play, which adopted the 'dress and manner of the latest English fashion', with the historical accuracy of the Reading Greek play. This was performed

amidst scenery correct yet splendid, and in costume every fold of which has been studied, with extreme care, and copied with the most exquisite taste from the noblest of antique statues.<sup>67</sup>

It may be no coincidence that the Elgin marbles had arrived in London in 1806, the year of the first Reading Greek play, and caused a considerable stir. Details of the Reading productions confirm that they aimed at visual authenticity: in the 1824 *Alcestis* not only was Apollo 'unearthly', but 'the zone, tunic and pallium were faithfully displayed'.<sup>68</sup> In *Heraclēs* the costume 'was exact even in the minutest details. Iris had her rainbow, Lyssa her snakes, and Theseus his Athenian grasshoppers.'<sup>69</sup> Those grasshoppers, presumably inspired by Thucydides' account of old-fashioned hair accessories in Athens (1.6), were symptoms of a literal archaeologism which had hardly yet penetrated even the commercial theatre.<sup>70</sup>

The quest for authenticity extended beyond the visual dimension of the tragedies. Stanmore school had omitted all choruses, but at Reading some choruses were certainly performed, at least in the later plays. In the 1827 *Hecuba* the chorus consisted of three boys, who delivered the strophes antiphonally as solos, apparently in order to share the burden of learning these difficult sequences of ancient Greek.<sup>71</sup> Considerable care was taken, moreover, over pronunciation; in the 1821 *Orestes*, at any rate, the actors distinguished clearly between the Attic and Doric dialects of the iambic and lyric metres, and restored final vowels throughout.<sup>72</sup>

However, another interesting aspect of these 'authentic' productions of Greek tragedy is the manner in which they were, with some subtlety, adapted. Dr. Valpy seems not always to have been willing to make his Scholars impersonate ancient Greeks with blatantly deficient morals. One example is the deliberate omission of Admetus' outrageously selfish father Phères from the 1824 *Alcestis*.<sup>73</sup> *Hecuba*, similarly, was slightly 'cleaned up': Polymestor's prophecies concerning the fates of Agamemnon and Hecuba were deleted altogether.<sup>74</sup> This had the effect of turning the play into a much simpler morality tale, whereby the wicked barbarian is punished by sympathetic agents themselves much less incriminated than they are in the original.

Perhaps the most important function of the Reading Greek plays was to make those involved with them sense the beauty of ancient literature and art: the costumes and scenery may have been modelled on Greek originals, but the writers of the reviews already speak like pre-Raphaelites of the sculptural or painterly beauty of the dramatic representations themselves. Another sentiment expressed by those who wrote about the plays is an apprehension that enactment of drama uniquely revealed a 'common humanity' shared by the ancient Greeks and themselves. In an era when a classical education often meant torture by grammatical exercises, some lucky Reading students, like Thomas Talfourd (who was virtually dyslexic and could not cope with Latin), discovered what it was like to be *inspired* by their cultural ancestors in Greece.

Decades later, witnesses of the Cambridge Greek plays were to speak of the *life* which performance breathed into these sepulchral texts. In an as yet unpublished paper Pat Easterling has shown how reviewers spoke of the 'vivifying influence' of these performances, and the way they offered 'contact with actual life' as it was lived in ancient Greece.<sup>75</sup> This sense was enhanced by the incorrect belief held by some that the Cambridge plays were the first performances of Greek dramas since antiquity. Yet the perception that enactment offers privileged access to the 'universal' concerns of the human soul, a profound spiritual communion with the ancients, was anticipated by reactions to the Reading plays. It informs Mitford's eulogy of the 1821 *Orestes*:

It was, indeed, delightful that these touches of pathos . . . were again awakening the same electrical sympathy, as of old – again swaying the heart of a large audience as a single bosom, and proving the human soul to be unaltered thro' all the long fluctuations of fortune.

Even today modern enthusiasts of Greek drama, experiencing the allegedly 'unaltered' condition of the human soul 'thro' all the long fluctuations of fortune', may be reaping a benefit of the productions in Georgian Reading: local memories of the Valpeian play seem to have been a factor in the initial experiments at Bradfield School, which is near Reading, over fifty years later.<sup>76</sup> Numerous factors thus lent significance to the Reading Greek plays, but ultimately their greatest importance lies in their status as the earliest sustained series of 'authentic' performances of the actual texts of Greek tragedy, in any language, to take place in this country.

## NOTES

1. The research for this article was made possible by Dr. Tessa Rajak's vigorous attempts to procure me leave from the Department of Classics at Reading University in 1995. Special thanks to Paul Cartledge, Pat Easterling, and Chris Stray, to the local history archivists at Reading Public Library, to Dr. Peter Mason (headmaster of Reading School), and to Dr. Fiona Macintosh for all the usual personal and professional reasons.

2. 'Representation of the Orestes at Reading School', *Reading Mercury* no. 5163, November 5th 1821, p. 5 col. 3.

3. For an excellent account of this whole period see Fiona Macintosh, 'Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Productions', in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (forthcoming, Cambridge, 1997).

4. See Frederick S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1914), 11–17. There may have been an *Antigone* in Greek at St. John's College, Cambridge, in the early 1580s; see Bruce R. Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage, 1500–1700* (Princeton, 1988), 216.

5. *Our Recent Actors* (London, 1888), vol. i. 3–4.

6. Richard Valpy (ed.), *Poems, Odes, Prologues, and Epilogues, Spoken on Public Occasions at Reading School* (London, 1804), vii–viii.

7. See further William Field, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of the Rev. Samuel Parr, LL.D.*, vol. i (London, 1828), 78–81; a shorter account is to be found in E. H. Barker, *Parriana, or Notices of the Rev. Samuel Parr, LL.D.*, vol. i (London, 1828), 10–11.

8. Michael Davis (ed.), *Areopagitica and Of Education* (London, 1963), 89–110 at 105.

9. Field (n. 7 above), 79–80.

10. W. B. Stanford, *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (Dublin, 2nd ed. 1984), 32–3.

11. Thomas Sheridan's two other published works were translations of Latin satire. See further Fraser Rae, 'Thomas Sheridan 1687–1738', *Dictionary of National Biography* vol. xviii (London, 1909), 86–7.

12. See Emmett L. Avery, *The London Stage, Part 2: 1700–1729* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1960), 319.

13. John Fines, *Dr. Richard Valpy, Headmaster of Reading School* (unpublished typescript, Reading Public Library, 1967), 17.

14. This cutting is said by Fines (n. 13 above), 17, to be in W. C. Eppstein's collection of newspaper cuttings relating to Reading School (1794–1808), held in Reading Public Library. It is not there now.

15. Raoul Lemprière, *Société Jersiaise Bulletin* no. 106, vol. xxiii (1981), 115–23.

16. Fines (n. 13 above), 11.

17. See *The Dramatic Works of Mary Russell Mitford* (London, 1854), vol. i. xvii.

18. Michael Naxton, *The History of Reading School* (Reading, 1986), 53. On the Winchester College plays in the sixteenth century see T. H. V. Motter, *The School Drama in England* (London/New York/Toronto, 1929), 28–35.

19. Oliver Oldfellow M.A. (pseudonym of B. B. Bockett), *Our School; or, Scraps and Scrapes in Schoolboy Life* (London, 1857), 73.

20. Field (n. 7 above), 80.

21. E. C. Marchant, 'Richard Valpy', *Dictionary of National Biography* vol. xx (London, 1909), 85–6.

22. See further M. L. Clarke, *Greek Studies in England 1700–1830* (Cambridge, 1945), 85–6, 93.

23. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud* (Basingstoke/London, 3rd ed. 1988), 402.

24. Mitford (n. 17 above), xv; Robert S. Newdick, *Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd* (unpublished typescript, no date but pre-1939, Reading Public Library), 13; Bockett (n. 19 above), 72; prologue to *Hecuba*, *Reading Mercury* no. 5564, October 29th 1827, p. 4 col. 3.

25. N. Carlisle, *A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools in England and Wales* (London, 1818), vol. i. 37–8.

26. Fines (n. 13 above), 15.

27. Richard Valpy (ed.), *Poems, Odes, Prologues, and Epilogues Spoken on Public Occasions at Reading School* (London, 2nd ed. 1826), vii.

28. Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Life and Times of Mrs. Sherwood (1775–1851), from the Diaries of Captain and Mrs Sherwood*, edited by F. J. Harvey Darton (London, 1910), 82–5, 130–3, 145.
29. Mary Russell Mitford, *Belford Regis: Sketches of a Country Town* (three volumes, London, 1835), vol. i. 313.
30. John J. Cooper, *Some Worthies of Reading* (London, 1923), 82.
31. Mitford (n. 29 above), 312–13, Mitford (n. 17 above), xv.
32. *Reading Mercury* no. 5563, Monday October 22nd 1827, p. 3 col. 2.
33. *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles. Acted at the Triennial Visitation of Reading School, Oct. 15, 16, 17, 1806* (Reading, 1806).
34. ‘Reading School Play. Triennial Visitation’, *Reading Mercury* no. 2334, Monday October 20th 1806, p. 3 col. 2. Mary Russell Mitford was later to claim that she had written all the reviews for the *Reading Mercury* (n. 17 above, xv), and she certainly composed all those from 1818 onwards. But it is unlikely that she wrote the earliest review in 1806.
35. William Darter, *Reminiscences of Reading, by an Octogenarian* (Reading, 1888), 111–14, 125.
36. Mitford (n. 29 above), 310.
37. Bockett (n. 19 above), 77.
38. *Reading Mercury* (n. 2 above).
39. Milton ed. Davis (n. 8 above), 104.
40. ‘Reading School Play’, *Reading Mercury* no. 2491, Monday October 23rd 1809, p. 3 col. 2.
41. *Reading Mercury* no. 4692, Monday October 26th 1812, p. 3 col. 3.
42. Mitford (n. 17 above), xvii, recalls a Reading Greek play featuring Antigone, which is more likely to have been Sophocles’ *Antigone* than Aeschylus’ *Septem*, Sophocles’ *O.C.* or Euripides’ *Phoenissae*.
43. *Reading Mercury* no. 4848, Monday October 23rd 1815, p. 3 col. 1.
44. *Reading Mercury* no. 4505, Monday October 18th 1818, p. 3 col. 3.
45. Fines (n. 13 above), 16.
46. *The Orestes of Euripides as Performed at the Triennial Visitation of Reading School, October 1821, Chiefly from Mr. Potter’s Translation* (Reading, 1821). See Darter (n. 35 above), 113.
47. ‘Reading, Sat. Oct. 16th’, *Reading Mercury* no. 5367, Monday October 18th 1824, p. 3 col. 2.
48. *Reading Mercury* (n. 32 above).
49. W. S. Ward, *Transcript of 19 Original Letters by Thomas Noon Talfourd, Deposited in Collections in the USA* (unpublished typescript, no date, Reading Public Library), 21.
50. Thomas Talfourd, ‘The Drama’ in *New Monthly Magazine* 21, Nov. 1st 1827, 462–5.
51. Marchant (n. 21 above), 86.
52. Mitford (n. 17 above), xxvi.
53. ‘The Greek plays’, in Mitford (n. 29 above), 294–318.
54. See further Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1980), 63–5.
55. Henry Chorley (ed.), *The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford* (second series, London, 1872), vol. ii. 213.
56. Mitford (n. 29 above), 308. See also 315, on the effect of the tragedies: ‘Even the most unlettered lady was sensible to that antique grace and pathos.’
57. Mitford (n. 17 above), xv.
58. Letter to Mrs. Hofland in Chorley (n. 55 above), vol. i. 116–17.
59. *Reading Mercury* (n. 32 above).
60. *Reading Mercury* (n. 32 above).
61. Chorley (n. 55 above), 116–17.
62. Mitford (n. 29 above), 314–15.
63. Mitford (n. 17 above), xvi.
64. Bockett (n. 19 above).
65. T. N. Talfourd, *Tragedies: To Which Are Added a Few Sonnets and Verses* (London, 1844 edition), 3–4, 260.
66. Valpy (n. 27 above), 173.
67. *Reading Mercury* (n. 2 above).
68. *Reading Mercury* (n. 47 above).
69. *Reading Mercury* (n. 44 above).
70. See Raymond J. Pentzell, ‘New Dress’d in the Ancient Manner: The Rise of Historical

Realism in Costuming the Serious Drama of England and France in the Eighteenth Century' (Diss. Yale 1967), 221–2.

71. *The Hecuba of Euripides, Represented at the Triennial Visitation of Reading School, Oct. 15, 16, 17, 1827. Translated by Mr. Potter* (Reading, 1827).

72. *Reading Mercury* (n. 47 above).

73. *Reading Mercury* (n. 47 above).

74. *The Hecuba of Euripides* (n. 71 above).

75. Pat Easterling's study is to be published in a PCPS supplement, edited by Chris Stray, containing essays on the history of Classics at Cambridge.

76. Lewis Campbell, *A Guide to Greek Tragedy for English Readers* (London, 1891), 319, 321 n. 1.

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