

Trustees of Boston University

Trustees of Boston University through its publication *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*

---

Towards a Theory of Performance Reception

Author(s): Edith Hall

Source: *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, Third Series, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 2004), pp. 51-89

Published by: Trustees of Boston University; Trustees of Boston University through its publication *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163955>

Accessed: 25-03-2016 15:08 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Trustees of Boston University, Trustees of Boston University through its publication Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*

<http://www.jstor.org>

---

# Towards a Theory of Performance Reception

EDITH HALL

The most important nights in the theater were seen by only a tiny fraction of the population and yet they have passed into the history of the world.

—Peter Sellars

## I. INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS ESSAY TENTATIVELY OUTLINES SOME of the theoretical issues facing the classicist who wants to study the ways in which ancient Greece and Rome have been “received” in performed media. It attempts to identify an intellectual ancestry for this type of scholarship, above all in schools of aesthetics deriving from German idealism, and thereby to define what it is about performance arts that makes the study of the ways they use Greek and Roman antiquity different from Reception in non-performed arts. Since this inquiry addresses cultural phenomena extending from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century, it does not engage with the scholarly controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the concept of performance in relation to the ancient world, which knew neither the term nor the category it denotes.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging that performance is a concept with its own (relatively recent) historical specificity, the discussion nevertheless assumes a commonsense definition of the word performance as it is used in our own time: to say that something from ancient Greece or Rome has been performed implies an aesthetic phenomenon in which humans have realized an archetypal text, narrative or idea by acting, puppet manipulation, dance, recital, or song; the category Performance Reception therefore excludes individuals reading a text to themselves, or the visual arts (except, hypothetically, when they are of a type requiring the label performance art).

ARION 12.1 SPRING/SUMMER 2004

The history of the consumption of all “classic” drama, as of episodes from ancient history (Shakespeare or historical movies as much as the Greek plays), is of academic interest in its own right, holding up a mirror to the contingent historical perspectives which have been brought to bear on these texts in their most public arenas of consumption. But there is a danger that Performance Reception in practice (of which there have been some outstanding examples)<sup>2</sup> may be running in advance of the theory. There have been few attempts to define the special qualities of Performance Reception besides some pages in Amy Green’s *The Revisionist Stage* (1994)<sup>3</sup> and Lorna Hardwick’s more systematic chapter “Staging Receptions,” contained in her excellent *Reception Studies* (2003). But Hardwick is more interested in the analytical categories of practice and methodology of Performance Reception than in the provenance of its theoretical models, and this essay is intended to be complementary.

One way of looking at Performance Reception is as a subcategory of what has conventionally been called “The Classical Tradition,” “The *Nachleben*,” or “The Reception” of ancient Greece and Rome. The performances may have taken the form of dramas, operas, ballets, films, radio, television, or audio-recordings, but they have all involved audiences responding to performers using their bodies, voices, and/or musical instruments in a visual or aural representation of material derived from an ancient Greek or Roman source. When it comes to live theater, the most often cited definition is Eric Bentley’s: its essential quality is that *A* impersonates *B* before *C*.<sup>4</sup> Performance Reception, at its most reductively defined, is the study of the process by which *A* impersonates a *B* derived from a classical prototype before *C*. Although other contributing subjectivities—those of translators, adaptors, authors, directors—are usually involved, it is the dynamic *triangular* relationship between ancient text, *performer*, and his or her audience that above all distinguishes Performance Reception from the study of the ways in which ancient texts have been received elsewhere,

for example in scholarship and academe, in school curricula, in private reading, in adaptations into other literary genres designed to be read privately (for example, the novel), or in the visual arts.

A little of what follows will apply to Performance Reception outside the theater, including classics in cinema, television, and radio. Some of it will apply to the theatrical Reception of ancient texts and material other than drama: to plays drawing on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plutarch's *Lives*, to gladiatorial spectacles in Victorian amphitheaters, or to *Tantalus*. A great deal of it will apply to the performance genres most closely allied to theater—live ballet and opera. Almost all of it will apply to the investigation of ways in which ancient theatrical genres, conventions, acting styles, and performance spaces have inspired people of the theater—especially those consciously involved in the aesthetic avant-garde of any generation—even when they have not been performing ancient texts or subject-matter at all. Examples would be the founding fathers of opera and subsequently ballet, who claimed their media originated in ancient tragedy and pantomime, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Even more of the arguments in this essay will apply to Performance Reception within antiquity—the thousand-year-long process of revival and adaptation undergone by the classics of the repertoire across the Greek and Roman worlds (the evidence for which has usually been ignored by scholars tracing particular themes diachronically across antiquity, with problematic results).<sup>6</sup> But the areas of overlap with, and distinctions between, all these phenomena and my own material will not be investigated in detail here: for the sake of precision the focus of the argument will be the post-Renaissance history of *theatrical* performances of Greek and Roman *drama*.

## 2. PERFORMANCE RECEPTION WITHIN CLASSICAL RECEPTION

The last three decades have seen the development of methods and theoretical infrastructures for the more generalized study of Classical Reception, which must inevitably provide a frame of reference for the aspiring theorist of Performance Reception. Charles Martindale's stimulating book, *Redeeming the Classics*, offers the exposition of two helpful theses in the practice of Reception theory. The first thesis contends that "numerous unexplored insights into ancient literature are locked up in imitations, translations, and so forth"; the second thesis argues that "our current interpretations of ancient texts . . . are . . . constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected."<sup>7</sup> These two propositions are eminently sensible, and will inform any intelligent exercise in Performance Reception. I am particularly keen on emphasizing the first thesis, that our appreciation of the original texts can be refined by excavating their afterlife, what they have "meant" in other cultures and epochs than those which originally produced them. A recent example of this in my own research has been a new understanding of the epistemological vacuum central to *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, gained by comparing this play's experiences at the hands of Protestants and Catholics respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The value of Martindale's *Redeeming the Text* is nevertheless limited for our purposes because it explicitly puts the *reader* at the center of Reception. It must be acknowledged that ancient plays are indeed frequently read without (or prior to) being performed, that they have since antiquity led lives partly *separate* from enactment, in scholarship and private reading, and that there is a dialectical relationship between the processes whereby they are realized in the consciousness of different individuals and generations, as texts that are read on the one hand, or as texts that are performed on the other. Robert Browning's transformation of

the text of Euripides' *Alcestis* into a poetic monologue in *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) is specifically a reaction against the vulgarities he perceived in the melodramatic, spectacular, mid-Victorian theater.<sup>9</sup> It is also important to Performance Reception to understand what published versions were available to any writer or director and what s/he might have studied academically. It makes a difference to the scholar investigating James Thomson, the author of the most important *Agamemnon* of the eighteenth century, to learn that he had access to no English version, knew Thomas Stanley's Latin crib, but had also studied advanced Greek at Edinburgh University.<sup>10</sup> Censure of theater people by those who study drama as literature, and of literature people by those who perform drama, has had a long and disreputable history, but is quite unnecessary if we accept, as Eric Bentley humanely urged, that neither "script-alone" nor "script-as-performed" is superior to the other: it is merely *different*.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, reading of other texts, especially those by directors, is essential for Performance Reception. Certain examples of ancient drama have only achieved prominence in the consciousness of theater professionals because one of their own canonical works of theory has constantly reminded them of it. An outstanding example is Antonin Artaud's description of Seneca as "the greatest tragic author in history, an initiate in the secrets who knew better than Aeschylus how to put them into words. I cry as I read his inspired theater, and underneath the sound of his syllables, I sense the transparent seething of the forces of chaos frothing at his mouth."<sup>12</sup> This brief encomium, because of the cult status of its author, lies behind Peter Brook's interest in Senecan drama and will always produce radical attempts at staging it.

The fact that drama originated in enactment rather than literary culture is irrelevant. By the time that ancient drama was transformed from a repertoire to a canon, Aristotle could already decree that a good tragic plot could induce an

emotional reaction in readers as well as spectators (*Poetics*, ch. 14, 1453b). Performance Reception must avoid excluding, indeed must embrace, the history of reading scripts alone, although if it fails to address performances altogether it will of course cease to be Performance Reception. Performance issues may often need to be addressed in the negative—why was a play’s performance banned at a particular time (as Shirley’s Whig *Electra* was censored by the British Prime Minister in 1762) or why were there no attempts to stage Aeschylus in the seventeenth century, or *Trojan Women* in the nineteenth.<sup>13</sup> But performance will never be absent altogether from the Performance Reception scholar’s perspective, as it has all too often been omitted from the discussions of scholars in departments of English studies, comparative literature, or modern languages (e.g., in the case of Goethe’s *Iphigenie auf Tauris*) as well as classics and ancient history.

No two scholars, of course, will practice Performance Reception in the same way, any more than they will interpret an ancient artwork in the same way against the background of its original creation. This is not just a matter of personal taste, but of theoretical models operating alongside the Reception-related notion of a text. Some scholarship in Performance Reception, for example, may be more informed by Formalism, Narratology, or Discourse Analysis if it studies the way in which different speech-acts in an ancient text (command, wish, promise, insult) have been translated over the centuries. It may draw on psychoanalytical models of literary theory if it traces shifts in sexual identity and representations of the body within the history of antiquity-related performances. Studies of the Reception of ancient comedy are just as likely to find inspiration in the Bakhtinian notion of carnival. Especially if inter-cultural models of ritual theater are adduced, anthropological theory may be the dominant model of analysis. Feminist theorists engaged in Performance Reception may, alternatively, draw on the idea of the “resisting reader” in witnessing how different

translations, commentaries, and adaptations of, say, *Medea* and the *Oresteia* have reacted to ancient male authors' patriarchal control of the female characters' voices within their texts. Some classicists in Performance Reception concentrate on the post-structuralist assault on the notions of literary canon and aesthetic value, and might excavate the legacy of the *scurra* or the afterlife in performance of "low" ancient genres, such as mime, the novel, or the fable.

My own sympathies have long been with models of cultural analysis derived from Marxism (nowadays often less frighteningly called historical materialism or cultural materialism). Issues of class, elitism, social reform, cultural legitimization of authority or theatrical challenges to it, and the types of aesthetic expression which were inspired by such societal phenomena, have informed many of the questions raised in the study Fiona Macintosh and I have recently conducted in *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660–1914* (forthcoming with OUP, January 2005). The theoretical models we found helpful included Pierre Vidal-Naquet's Marxist-inflected historical relativism, which locates Greek tragedy's power to transcend history precisely in its susceptibility to radically different interpretations. This certainly explains, for example, why *Iphigenia in Tauris* could be adapted into English with equal conviction, within fifty years, by an ardent Royalist, an obsessive Whig, and a self-conscious avoider of party politics.<sup>14</sup> When dealing with the portrayal of women, for example the rape victim Creusa in Euripides' *Ion*, we felt the importance of a late development in the literary criticism of the Russian formalist (who was also profoundly influenced by Marxist aesthetics) Mikhail Bakhtin, that is, his notion that a measure of the greatness of literature is the degree to which it aboriginally holds "prefigurative" meanings that can only be released by reassessments and revivals lying far away in what he eventually called "great time" in the future.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes a more dialectical, Marxist-derived perspective provided significant illumination, in arguing with



Jean-Pierre Vernant that all important artworks actively condition the shapes taken by future artworks, whether the conditioning takes the form of emulation, modification, or rejection.<sup>16</sup> No dramatic author writing about mother-son incest can conceivably avoid forging some kind of relationship with Sophocles' *Oedipus*. It became tempting even to see Greek tragedy as actively conditioning not only later drama but the actual shapes taken by future society and its moral discourses, a position argued persuasively in relation to Shakespearean theater and performance history by Robert Weiman.<sup>17</sup>

Performance Reception can of course operate simply as one of several components of a more generalized model of Reception. This is especially the case if the research project's organizing principle is an ancient author (e.g., Ovid or Plutarch), an ancient text (e.g., the *Aeneid*), a chronological period (e.g., the eighteenth century), a nation-state or geographical or linguistic area (the German Democratic Republic, the Caribbean, the global Greek-speaking diaspora). Yet Performance Reception has until recently been neglected in comparison with Reception in non-performed media such as the published text aimed at readers, or the visual arts. Even when Performance Reception could have played a useful supplementary role in Classical Reception, it has been avoided as a result of several different factors: ignorance, conceptual gulfs yawning between classics and other disciplines, lack of accessible data, distrust in "ephemera," a reluctance to step outside the canon of famous western authors, contempt for "popular" entertainment, and more atavistic anti-performative prejudices of one Platonic, Aristotelian or Judeo-Christian kind or another.<sup>18</sup> Almost all histories of classical scholarship neglect the rich parallel life that ancient texts have enjoyed in post-Renaissance theaters, a parallel life in which classical scholars have often been closely involved.<sup>19</sup> The same prioritization of the permanent imprint or image over the "ephemeral" performed moment has characterized most scholarly investigations into the Re-

ception of influential authors such as Homer and Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* has been enjoyed by far more individuals in theaters and opera houses than he ever reached via textual study.

### 3. THE SPECIAL NATURE OF PERFORMANCE RECEPTION: I. TRANSLATION

Performance Reception had always been bound up with the history of translation. Many of the earliest versions of plays were made with the purpose of performance in mind, for example the imitation of Plautus' *Amphitryo* published in London anonymously in 1562–63 under the title *A New Enterlude for Chyldren to playe, named Jack Jugeler, both wytte, and very playsent Newly Imprentid.*<sup>20</sup> Most of the plays of Euripides were unavailable in translation until long after they had been Englished for performance, sometimes in versions so close to the original as to be virtually indistinguishable from translations, as, for example, Richard West's *Hecuba*, designed for performance at Drury Lane in 1725, decades before Euripides' complete works were translated into the English language.<sup>21</sup> Performance Reception should also be central to discussion of the precise nature of all translations designed for performance, such as Tony Harrison's version of the *Oresteia* for the London National Theater in 1981, whose diction, register, and phrasing were created specifically with *masked* delivery in mind.

But the performance dimension of the translation issue is more complicated than this. The post-structuralist assault on the stability of language must enter the argument here. Derrida took his position on the impossibility of translation even further than in "Des tours de Babel,"<sup>22</sup> when he said at a conference in California in June 2002: "The paradox of translation is that the translator must strive to be as faithful as possible to the original author's style and intent, while at the same time recognizing that it's impossible to reconstitute the unique meaning of the original words. The alchemy

of translation occurs precisely at that point where an essentially new work is created.”<sup>23</sup> Translation, in Derrida’s view, a view shared by most of us currently operating within the Academy, is a process of what he calls “contamination,” of a strong form of interpretation, of the imposition of bias and meaning on a text in a specially violent way. This can be an act of treachery (as the Italians say, *traduttore, traditore*) or of homage, when the concept of a benevolent or positive counterfeit must necessarily become, as Barnstone insists, “an epistemological paradox.”<sup>24</sup> It may be an unconscious or a conscious process, but translation “is not a mirror. Nor is it a mimetic copy. It is another creation” which owes form and content to its source.<sup>25</sup> A powerful instance in the Reception of drama (although it was probably not performed) of *conscious* imposition of new meaning is provided by the earliest English translation of Sophocles’ *Electra*, an allegorical version by the Royalist Christopher Wase, created in 1649 shortly after Charles I was executed. This explicitly equates Aegisthus with Oliver Cromwell. Visual images in interaction with the Italian translation used in a recent Roman production of *Frogs*, directed by Luca Ronconi, imposed too much contemporary meaning for the taste of Berlusconi’s government, which took it upon itself to intervene.<sup>26</sup>

Most performances of ancient Greek and Roman theatrical works are in translation or more extensive adaptation. They involve, in the form of new playscripts, a baseline ideological “fixing” of meaning. This is because, according to Derrida, verbal translation inevitably entails such a strong form of interpretation. Some intellectual productions of ancient drama have directly addressed this process: Peter Stein notoriously explored the impossibility of finding a single “correct” translation of any ancient Greek term in the first production of his monumental *Oresteia* in Berlin (1980), often by providing the audience with several alternative substitutes for an ancient Greek word or phrase.<sup>27</sup> When the degree of adaptation is more extensive, the “anachronistic”

new ideological trajectory it takes will become even more divorced from what the text originally “meant” in the context of its ancient première. But when this strongly inflected ideological and cultural product, the essentially new work that the translator/adaptor has brought into being, is also then subjected to realization in *performance*, a second and by no means less significant act of translating—or traducing—occurs. This is partly because of the psychological power of actorly mimesis (see below) and partly because of the sheer number of individual agents—director, designer, composer, lighting designer, as well as actors—whose subjectivities leave their traces on the “carrying across,” the “translation” of the text into the medium of physical enactment and vocal delivery. The text is exposed to artillery from a whole battalion of human interpreters, rather than to single combat. For those of us for whom the title “Classical Reception” has always seemed to conceive our subject in too passive a manner, and for whom “Appropriation” seems to be a more suitable description, then the collective assault on the text in which a whole theater company engages in its secondary phase of “translation” must inevitably represent a peculiarly strong form even of Appropriation.

## II. BODY

One of the most perceptive twentieth-century books on the theater was Eric Bentley’s classic *The Life of the Drama* (1965). It is interesting to read Bentley, writing just as the theater, in common with much of the rest of society, approached its most climactic revolution in taste, subject matter, and subjectivity for decades, presciently declare that the body, and a certain type of inherent “indecenty,” lie at the core of the theatrical experience. Bentley argues (in a manner that to post-feminist sensibilities reads most uneasily, especially in his remarks about the fundamental theatricalism of female strip artists at the Folies-Bergère) that while fine art deals with the nude, the theater deals with the naked.

Just because theater has often involved substantial costuming, make-up, and even masks, what is concealed by such artifice is always the living, breathing, human body of the actor. If it is completely replaced by celluloid records or mechanical puppets, it ceases to be theater and becomes an altogether different form of mimesis.<sup>28</sup> Theater, argues Bentley with considerable cogency, “is shamelessly ‘low’; it cannot look down on the body, because it *is* the body.” If we are to understand the art of theater, we must accept that “we *do* wish to see, and we do wish to be stimulated by seeing bodies . . . We are prying into filthy secrets.” Theater is fundamentally indecent. Actors exhibit themselves; spectators are voyeurs. Just because most dramatists play out the indecency at a remove, and the nakedness becomes the laying bare of the mind, the psyche, rather than of the material body, “the immediate reality of theater is aggressively physical, corporeal.” This makes it different even from painting and sculpture in that “only theater thrusts at its audience the supreme object of sensual thoughts: the human body.”<sup>29</sup>

Common to both Greek comedy and satyr play is the display of a male body that is generically and often riotously hyper-male, thus calling attention to theater’s uniquely corporeal status and medium of presentation. At its most ribald, Old Comedy even presented its audience either with naked women, or men pretending to be naked women, and it is difficult to decide which would have been the more bodily emphatic. Greek tragedy is profoundly interested in its own processes of imitating beautiful, erotically alluring bodies; in ancient Greek tragedy, at moments of essentially tragic emotion involving pity and fear, eros and thanatos, there is a marked tendency to compare the tragic figures—especially females—to works of visual art, whether paintings or statues, in an implicit acknowledgement of the visual objectification of the characters represented by the actors on stage.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, at the core of the tragic experience, as Eagleton has recently insisted, lies the representation of a phenomenon whose claim to transhistorical invariability is great: physical

agony. Eagleton eloquently reminds us that Philoctetes' screams are only up to a point susceptible to trendy, cultural relativization.<sup>31</sup> What happens to the nervous system and the neurological synapses during onslaughts of physical pain has not changed much over time, even if the cultural codes for representing or psychologically dealing with the pain are transhistorically variable. For the researcher into Performance Reception, therefore, the *somatic* quality of theater means that it always represents important clues as to how any particular society envisages such basic aspects of human experience as the body, gender, sexual desire, injury, and suffering, in addition to the great physical rites of passage such as mating, birth, and death.

### III. MIMESIS

The body in the theater is the body of the actor. Joseph Chaikin, himself a charismatic and influential actor/director, has tried to describe in words the inherently non-verbal dynamism—what Walter Benjamin suggestively called the *aura*—generated by a powerful actor's stage presence. "It's a quality that makes you feel as though you're standing right next to the actor, no matter where you're sitting in the theater . . . There may be nothing of this quality offstage or in any other circumstance in the life of such an actor. It's a kind of libidinal surrender which the performer reserves for his anonymous audience."<sup>32</sup> This is, by any account, simply not the same type of encounter as that experienced by a reader with a Penguin Classic in her study.

What an actor brings to life by skills in mimesis is a *role*. One of the most overlooked of all playwright's tasks among students of "script-alone" (i.e., dramatic literature) is that he or she must write not just a "character" but a "role."<sup>33</sup> Having to write a number of roles for individual actors to sustain is even more integral to the playwriting process than writing the separate parts for each musical instrument involved in playing an orchestral symphony. This is because

every role—even a quite minor part—is likely to be scrutinized as an individual entity by spectators and reviewers in a manner impossible for a musical auditor except where one of the instruments becomes so separate and so virtuoso that the symphony turns into a concerto. A role's full possibilities can only be revealed by great acting: a great role well acted can, moreover, actually leave the stage and enter general discourse, invent a whole new individual to add permanently to a culture's functional imaginative "cast." Clytemnestra, like her descendant Lady Macbeth, ultimately lies behind the public vilification of countless hapless wives of powerful men.

In a thought-provoking essay, Michael Goldman has recently argued that the one thing everyone *always* "recognizes" in a play is the "presence of acting."<sup>34</sup> When Aristotle first mentions imitation in the *Poetics*, in his argument that people enjoy the learning process, he already implicitly connects *imitation*, mimesis, to the importance of recognition (*Poetics*, ch. 4, 1448b). Recognition, so argues Goldman, "has a unique inflection in the theater because it is connected with a psychological mechanism that also achieves a unique theatrical prominence, the mechanism we call *identification*."<sup>35</sup> Identification, indeed, is the linchpin of drama, a process by which an actor creates, sustains, and projects an identity; it is, perhaps, therefore inevitable that the establishing and relinquishing of selfhood should be a theme of all drama of all types from all periods.<sup>36</sup> Performance Reception deals with nothing less than the way in which successive generations have mimetically projected and explored their own fundamental identities.

The type of plot in all drama, including ancient drama, also frequently reflects the way that drama functions psychologically. It is true, of course, that one school of theatrical theory, usually associated with the name of Brecht, argues that the purpose of theater is to "alienate" its spectators by making them more or less permanently aware of the formal processes by which the cognitive fallacy that they are

experiencing is maintained. Many thinkers have seen the conceptual and epistemological chasm yawning between later audiences and the original consumers of ancient drama as the most important source of its theatrical power in later revivals: Oscar Wilde argued, long before Brecht crystallized his theory of Epic Theater, that Hecuba's sorrows are so suitable a motive for a tragedy because Realism is doomed to failure: the moment Art surrenders its detachment from reality it is lost, and every artist needs to avoid "modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter . . . any century is a suitable object for art except our own."<sup>37</sup> On this account, it is the very cultural chasm separating Hecuba from post-Euripidean audiences which somehow underlines her sorrow. Yet this hyper-intellectual school of thought has never been shared by most regular theater-goers, for whom it remains perennially true that at the core of live drama lie the twin processes of substitution of one "person" by another (i.e., by an actor) and identification of one person (i.e., the spectator) *with* another (represented by the actor). Moreover, these two processes, substitution and identification, have always left their marks on dramatic plots. Drama has always, not just in ancient Greece and Rome, been peopled by sons trying to step into their fathers' shoes, sisters who become spokespersons for dead brothers' rights, mothers who murder their husbands in the name of slaughtered daughters, by regents, surrogates, and step-relatives. Dramas have also always invited audiences to identify with the suffering of individuals on stage, whether the fourth-century tyrant Alexander, embarrassed because he wept on behalf of Euripides' Hecuba and Andromache in *Trojan Women* (Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas* 29.4–6), or another fourth-century audience who identified profoundly with Electra's grief over Orestes' urn as enacted by the actor Polus (Aulus Gellius, *NA* 6.35). Just as every human substitutes every individual with whom he or she "really" engages in a never-ceasing reliving of his or her primal affective drama, and repeatedly identifies with individuals imagined to take the place of the self in that primary



drama, so the family, the site of the primary drama, very early—shortly after the birth of tragedy—gravitated to the core of dramatic fiction.<sup>38</sup> Performance Reception of ancient theater thus offers the potential for discovering the most intimate sites of affective identification utilized by successive generations. Seen from this perspective, it has an unusual claim to offering insights into each generation's imaginative apprehension of no less important an institution than the nuclear family.<sup>39</sup>

Great acting, the specific realization of the specific role, is also likely to leave its traces on the text, in that all subsequent actors attempting the same role will need to position themselves and their performance relative to the great forerunner. An experienced audience will also come to appreciate a new performance of a famous role only in comparison with a previous realization: subsequent adapters have always had to contend quite as much with a great actor's earlier performance as with the transmitted playscript. It is the traces left by the actors in the historically specific moment of performance, as much as the serial adapters and authors, that mean that Performance Reception requires an unusual combination of *diachronic* and *synchronic* thinking (a combination also discussed, from another perspective, in Hardwick's survey).<sup>40</sup>

The fullest intellectual insights into Performance Reception will always take place at the precise intersection of the diachronic history of a particular text—especially but not exclusively its previous performance history—and the synchronic reconstruction of what such a text will have meant at the time of the production being investigated. Productions *are* ephemeral, far more ephemeral than novels, lyric poems, or paintings, a quality which makes the synchronic plane peculiarly important to understanding them. The power of theater is actually inseparable from its ephemerality (see below). But theatrical productions are also peculiarly dense in their accrued genealogical status, because of the contribution of previous *performers* and directors as well as previous writ-

ers, translators, and adaptors. The influence of all these performances accumulates like compound interest on a capital sum. When Fiona Shaw recently performed *Medea*, her approach to the role was palpably informed not only by other eminent actresses (notably Diana Rigg) but also by a long tradition of *divas* attempting to outdo the legendary performances of their predecessors. This can be traced back as least as far as Sarah Bernhardt, who herself was positioned in a Medean stemma that leads to Adelaide Ristori and the early nineteenth-century operatic star Giuditta Pasta.<sup>41</sup> This makes the diachronic grasp of the stemmatic position of the individual production—the specific act of *mimesis*—both more complicated and more potentially revealing than in the case of other types of Classical Reception.

Before leaving the reasons why actorly *mimesis* makes Performance Reception qualitatively different from other types of Classical Reception, it is important to reflect on the argument advanced by some Phenomenologists that theater is uniquely important because of its unusual *truth value*. On this argument, theater is privileged precisely because it is so patently artificial, its characters so unreal, resulting in a potential to reveal the truth without the mendacious tendency of discursive practices which “hypocritically” (the word originally meant “like an actor,” a *hupokritês*) stake false *claims* to veracity. Untrue or distorted news reportage or political oratory, or travel guides, or biographies, can all “masquerade” as truth. Theater can never masquerade as the truth because it *is* masquerade. Its insights into the society or subjectivity of the time of the production may therefore, paradoxically, be unusually veracious and penetrating. The Phenomenological approach to theatrical *mimesis* would argue that Performance Reception is the most important type of Classical Reception, because of its potential to reveal the truth about the values, fears, and aspirations of the society watching the performance.

The approach stems from Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, whose philosophical method entailed re-

vealing the meaning of things and events through revealing the structures underlying *their modes of appearing*. To an influential Phenomenological theorist of drama, “theater is a disciplined use of the fictionalizing imagination which can discover . . . aspects of actuality.”<sup>42</sup> An eloquent expression of this view can be found in the fiction of the dramatist Jean Genet, whose 1941 novel *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* depicts, through the fantasies of its narrator, a gay demi-monde, where the worlds and identities created by cabaret art and transvestism are truer, more authentic, than the duplicity and hypocrisy of the French legal and punitive system. At the cabaret on the Rue Lepic, “It is customary to come in drag, *dressed as ourselves*.”<sup>43</sup> Theater’s truth results from its self-conscious fakery, in contrast with the falseness of people’s conduct in “real life.”

The future Athanasius of Alexandria, who grew up to be no friend of theater’s false images, nevertheless told the other children at playtime that he “was” their bishop.<sup>44</sup> Further support of the “truth” value of theater could certainly be elicited from the child psychologists who study play and its functions in the young.<sup>45</sup> Erik Erikson insisted that “even where nobody sees it or does anything about it children proceed to express their vital problems in the metaphoric language of play—more consistently and less self-consciously than they are able or willing to in words.”<sup>46</sup> It does not take much paraphrasing to conclude that human society can express its vital problems in the metaphoric language of *the* play more consistently and less self-consciously than they are able or willing to in words.

#### IV. MEMORY

Performance history constitutes time travel into a personal, individual arena of human history. Watched in physical company with many other spectators, performance offers privileged access to mass ideology and collective taste and prejudice, and it is as a source for such phenomena that it

tends to be used by social historians. But it simultaneously permits access to the private imaginative worlds of the individual members of previous generations. Theater happens, and leaves its psychological records, precisely at the intersection of the collective and the individual, the “ideological” and the “subjective.” Theater critics have, moreover, long been aware that there is something distinctive about the immanent presence of live performance in the human memory. Far from being an ephemeral art, which happens, comes to an end, and vanishes without a trace, a compelling theatrical experience can leave a much deeper impression on the memory even than the printed word or painted image. Although Sigmund Freud had access to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a “script-alone” in his youth, when he indeed translated part of it at school, he never recovered from the experience of watching the great tragic actor Jean Mounet-Sully perform the role of Oedipus at the Comédie-Française in Paris while he was studying with Jean Charcot at the Salpêtrière in 1885–6.<sup>47</sup>

Matthew Arnold was so overwhelmed by the lovely Helen Faucit’s realization of the role of Sophocles’ Antigone in 1845, that he later designed his tragedy *Merope* along lines which he hoped would make it suitable for performance by this superb tragic actress.<sup>48</sup> The Irish writer and theater critic Percy Fitzgerald confessed that his fantasy life was haunted by the same performance: the “classical vision haunted my boyish dreams for weeks, and does still . . . It seemed some supernatural figure lent temporarily to this base earth.<sup>49</sup> Faucit’s Antigone affected both Arnold and Fitzgerald with an acute and libidinally charged version of what the scholar of myth Joseph Campbell was a few decades later to term “Aesthetic Arrest.”<sup>50</sup>

In writing about film, the Marxist-formalist critic Fredric Jameson formulates ideas that illuminate the impact any performance with a visual dimension has on the human psyche. To Jameson,

movies are a physical experience, and are remembered as such, stored up in bodily synapses that evade the thinking mind. Baudelaire and Proust showed us how memories are part of the body anyway . . . or perhaps it would be better to say that memories are first and foremost memories of the senses, and that it is the senses that remember, and not the ‘person’ or personal identity.<sup>51</sup>

Memory is *primarily* sensual, and it is the senses that can so often “jog” memory of a long-forgotten film (or theatrical performance) years after the event. Jameson goes on to describe beautifully, in relation to film, how visual images saturate the psyche immediately after they are watched,

in the seam between the day to day; the filmic images of the night before stain the morning and saturate it with half-conscious reminiscence, in a way calculated to raise moralizing alarm; like the visual of which it is a part, but also an essence and a concentration, and an emblem and a whole program, film is an addiction that leaves its traces in the body itself.<sup>52</sup>

But Jameson’s meditation on the specialness of the filmic experience is also suggestive for anyone trying to understand the importance of what happens in a theater. In film, he says, the visual “glues” things back together, it “seals up the crevices in the form; it introduces a third thing alongside the classical Aristotelian question of Plot and the modern Benjaminian question of Experience”;<sup>53</sup> in a modified form, the theatrical “visual” has been sealing up crevices in form for two and a half millennia, adding a third fundamental constituent to the art-form, alongside Plot and Experience. Many plays seem episodic or lacking in “unity” to the critic who only reads them: A. W. Schlegel’s influential indictment on the ground of disunity of a play that he—like all his early nineteenth-century contemporaries—had only ever read (Euripides’ *Trojan Women*) was to ensure that it was held in low regard for decades subsequently.<sup>54</sup> Yet it suddenly made complete sense when theatrically performed, precisely because of the Unity of Vision. It became startlingly

obvious in performance that one character, Hecuba, visually supplied the axis around which every action, emotion, and encounter revolves.<sup>55</sup>

#### V. PSYCHE

The sensuous dimension of theater, the intellectual importance of experiencing it via the physical senses, of avoiding reducing it to a “meaning” that can be apprehended without consideration of its sensual impact, has been brilliantly advocated by Susan Sontag in “Against Interpretation.”<sup>56</sup> But the genealogy of the postmodern *positive* apprehension of the theatrical experience can be traced back to the early eighteenth century, which saw the first theoretical revolution in the understanding of theater seriously to challenge the anti-performance prejudices inherited from Plato. Plato’s attack on the theater was a function, of course, of his appreciation of its power. His understanding of the fusion of identities that goes on in the theater and its annihilation of the boundaries demarcating *I* from the actor from the acted role was so good that the verb *mimeisthai* and its cognates are notoriously stretched to breaking-point in his discussion of the process in books two and three of the *Republic*. They are made to cover not only what the poet does, what *oratio recta* does, and what the narrator’s persona does, but what the poem does, the rhapsode does, the actor does, and arguably even what the theatrical audience contributes to the experience.<sup>57</sup> The thinker who first produced a theoretical model which could begin to cast the visual and bodily dimensions of theatrical *mimesis* in a more positive light—however elliptically—was Giovanni Battista Vico, in his *Scienza nuova* of 1725. Vico’s proto-anthropological approach to literature tried to get beyond the rational, scientific, and cerebrally sophisticated analytical thinking of the classical Greeks in order to recover their pre-verbal, emotional, and sensual experiences of the natural and the supernatural, above all in the “poetic metaphysics” and “poetic

wisdom” of Homer. In an appendix on the dramatic and lyric poets, however, he extended his thesis to the transmitted written scripts of the Greek theater, beneath which lay the bodies of the chorus members and actors like Thespis, who engaged their spectators from carts at vintage time, in a mimetic enactment of primordial myths.<sup>58</sup>

It was through a fairly direct route through Kantian and subsequent German idealism that Vico’s characterization of the sensual wisdom of the Greek poets led to one of the most important theorists of Theatricality, Søren Kierkegaard. In 1843, he published *Either/Or*, in which theater provides no less than a paradigm of the aesthetic consciousness, a paradigm which has gone beyond notions of art to enter the sphere of the existential. Kierkegaard’s ruminations lend philosophical legitimacy to the concepts of the selectivity of memory, the aesthetic categories by which it prioritizes types of experience, and in particular the cognitive and emotional power of the experience of performed language and music (in his case, Mozartian opera). He believed that there is a difference in the experience of theater between physical and mental time. For Kierkegaard, the immediacy of “the Moment” of apprehension of a performance transcends time, for the images it leaves on the mind are uniquely powerful and indelible. The moment of performance ideally gains its emotive force from the “immanent acceleration” in the representation as well as its sensual wholeness, grounded in the material instantiation of the characters and events. This moment is in one sense lost forever, but it can also be held in remarkable detail in the consciousness until death.<sup>59</sup> Ibsen was influenced by this argument when he makes the eponymous hero of his *Brand* (1885) observe at the end of act four that “only what is lost can be possessed for ever.”<sup>60</sup>

If Kierkegaard was concerned with conscious memories of theatrical experiences, the susceptibility of theatrical imagery to the human *subconscious* also contributes to the special nature of Performance Reception. Even in antiquity people experienced theatrical dreams. Demosthenes was said

to have dreamed that he was an actor, competing in a tragic competition with Archias ([Plutarch], *Life of Demosthenes* 28–29). Before the battle of Arginusae, one of the Athenian admirals dreamt that he and his six colleagues were playing the roles of the Seven against Thebes in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, while the Spartan leaders were competing against them as the sons of the Seven in his *Suppliant Women* (Diodorus 13.97–98). Artemidorus discusses dreams in which the dreamer acts in a tragedy or comedy, or imagines himself as a satyr, dancing for Dionysus.<sup>61</sup> Freud would not have been surprised by these ancient accounts of theater dreams, since he was convinced of the affinity between the world of the theater and dreamscapes.

*The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) proposes the principle of visual and indeed dramatic composition in dreams—how mental images follow dramatic models and embody mimetic representations of living reality and natural movement. When comparing Raphael's painting *School of Athens* to the work done by dreams, Freud spoke of the way in which abstract thoughts become conveyed by dreams in a "pictorial language," but a language in which the images were imbued with a dynamism derived from dramaturgic principles; dreamers incorporate their ideas, transformed into pictures, into a *stage* setting. This process effectively "dramatizes" the idea.<sup>62</sup> In the concluding sections of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud explores "ideational mimetics," or the way in which ideas are communicated in word and gesture. In the essays comprising *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913), he analyzed ancient rituals as dramatic enactments of myth, emotion, and history; from them emerged the earliest true drama, whose mimetic function aimed to restore absent objects in the ceremonial arena.<sup>63</sup> In the later twentieth-century feminist reaction against Freud, the picture has been supplemented by new concepts such as the "sexual scenography" Irigaray identifies in Platonic metaphysics, above all in the myth of the womblike cave of *Republic* book five, and the "return" of



Kristeva's "maternal 'repressed' . . . asking for new spaces, and therefore, new representations."<sup>64</sup> These psychoanalytical concepts are important to Performance Reception because they imply that the theater, more than any other art form (except cinema, a largely post-Freudian development), has supplied the very furniture equipping the site of each society's innermost fantasies, the imagery not only of humankind's conscious mind, but of its most primal, subconscious motivations.

#### VI. CONTINGENCY

Frederic Jameson regards the novel as more closely related to film than film's "more obvious cousins [such] as the theater play or video experimental or commercial."<sup>65</sup> But in his discussion of film he nevertheless introduces a notion—that of *contingency*—which can aid this quest for a theory to underpin the theater-centered practice of Performance Reception. Jameson has been affected by a theoretical insight of Jean-Paul Sartre, himself a movie-goer from the age of three. Sartre records that the theory of contingency, which is the fundamental experience of his novel *Nausea* as well as the linchpin of his own brand of Existentialism, emerged specifically from his own youthful experience of film. It was derived from pondering on the mysterious difference between the images in the film and the "real" world outside the film. The film will always be identical, and its images always happen in the sequence ordered by the director. Life outside, on the other hand, is always contingent, often surprising or unpredictable, the images it presents subject to no directorial control.<sup>66</sup>

Sartre's notion of *contingency* holds promise for the theory of Performance Reception (and not for the same reasons as Aristotle, who in *Poetics* ch. 9, 1452a, already discusses what type of contingency was suitable to causation within drama). If movies are entirely *uncontingent*, and life is entirely *contingent*, then a live theatrical performance must lie

somewhere between these two poles. Performed plays have a script similar to a film's, which (except, of course, in avant-garde experiments such as Richard Schechner's "interactive" *Dionysus in 69*, a notorious reworking of *Bacchae* which actually opened in 1968) are largely expected to be performed in a linear movement, more or less from beginning to end, missing out and adding nothing, at every single performance. Most plays are rehearsed by actors so that the way in which phrases and speeches are delivered, the use of the physical body and of props, the tempo at which proceedings are conducted, are all intended to be identical each night. That is, conventional and polished performances try to eradicate the effects of contingency. On the other hand, the performance must always interact with the responses (or lack of them) evinced by the audience, which will be different at each performance, and no one gesture or phrase can *ever* be performed in an absolutely identical manner. Moreover, the performances even of hallowed examples of the classical repertoire are always subject to actors' changes in timing, memory lapses, interpolations, and spontaneous elaborations of gesture or expression. They are vulnerable to disastrous eventualities—electricity failure, actors who pass out, "corpse," or trip on their hemlines.

Fundamentally, the contingency attending upon a theatrical performance (except one that is being experienced via a video recording) is both the greatest threat to the success of the performance and the source of its greatest power.<sup>67</sup> One of the most popular of all plays in antiquity, and one said by its Alexandrian hypothesis-writer to work particularly well on the stage, is *Orestes*, at whose première the house was brought down when its leading actor, Hegelochus, fluffed a line.<sup>68</sup> The laughter that broke out became anecdotal. The sheer performability of that text was thus in antiquity associated closely with the contingent excitement of experiencing it in performance by demonstrably fallible actors. The "electrical" current that passes between a live actor communicating effectively (but always with the potential of fal-

libility) with an audience—Walter Benjamin’s “aura”—may not be the same as the psychic saturation offered by the indelible manufactured images of cinema, but it is as powerful. Unlike the aura of physical presence in the theater, the specious intimacy and proximity which film offers is actually “based on a mutual absence mediated by the camera.”<sup>69</sup> Practitioners of Performance Reception need to bear this in mind, especially when dealing with now legendary performances—Judith Anderson as Medea, Laurence Olivier as Oedipus, Barrie Rutter as Silenus.

In a suggestive discussion of metadrama, Richard Hornby addresses the crucial difference between poor productions which are so ineptly acted that they fail to create any sustained identification in their audiences, and those in which the audience is so strongly involved that a deliberate shattering of the dramatic illusion works to strip away temporarily the imaginary framework of role and play only to affirm it. He cites as an example of effective metadramatic technique the moment in Schechner’s *Dionysus in 69* when the true name and identity of the actor playing Pentheus—Bill Shephard—was suddenly acknowledged.<sup>70</sup> To strip away the fiction of performance is to draw “upon the very essence of live theater,” which combines a presence and an ever-present threat of *absence*. The actuality of living, breathing, sweating actors is present alongside the imminent absence of the identities they have assumed if the electric current charging the performance fails. “The special, magical feeling that we experience in the theater is the result of our awareness that there is so much that can go wrong, that a performance always teeters on the brink of the disaster,” despite the physicality and tangible presence of the performers.<sup>71</sup> This kind of excitement was for me exemplified by watching Greg Hicks as Dionysus carry off Peter Hall’s otherwise unremarkable *Bacchai* in 2001 by the sheer, sustained force of his presence and actorly expertise.

Orthodox structuralists see the live nature of theater as a background or frame—it is part of the *langue* in which the

theatrical *parole*—specific utterance and gesture—take place. For the live-ness, therefore, is not actually, at least in isolation, the *defining* feature of theater, since listening to an after-dinner speaker deliver an oration in his or her “real” persona does not offer the same degree or even type of engagement as a theatrical performance. It is the *live-ness* of the representation of the *fictive identities*, the manner in which they are sustained through time and across action and encounter, and the contingent threat to their successful continuance—the imminence and immanence of *absence*—which is nearer to the essential nature of theater. Moreover, mediocre theater does not take its audience as close to the edge of breakdown of the conjured identities as good theater; part of the effectiveness of a performance is the extent to which it can teeter on the edge of chaos, of breakdown, of anarchy (as the première of Euripides’ *Orestes* teetered on the edge of dissolution), but without actually collapsing.

#### VII. TEMPORAL ORIENTATION

The relative contingency of theater is connected with its temporal orientation. Here help can be sought from Susanne Langer, a theorist influenced by Ernst Cassirer’s Symbolism, which was itself partly a product of the tradition of German idealist aesthetics which had earlier given rise to Kierkegaard’s idea of The Moment. Cassirer argued that art gives form above all to human feeling and that, therefore, the effect of art is never fully analyzable discursively in language, because what art forms do is *communicate the non-verbal*. Langer took this notion further, to argue that art forms, including drama, have their own immanent laws, and offer us a kind of (what as early as the 1950s she described as) “virtual reality,” a conceptual space or place with its own inner rhythms. Mimesis is not a hallucination or a delusion, but an “affecting presence.” What distinguishes different forms of art is the nature of that virtual space they create. Langer maintains that narrative literature provides a “virtual past”

or “virtual memory,” lyric with a “virtual experience,” but drama—and this is crucial given that drama can be set in the past, present, or future—with a “virtual *future*,” on account of its constant orientation towards *what will happen next*.<sup>72</sup>

Even the remote time depicted in ancient tragedy (which is set in its original audience’s past) or in ancient comedy (set in its original audience’s present) is transformed by live enactment into a dynamic representation of the margin between “now” and “after now.” When we watch *Antigone*, however well we know the play, we are always present in Thebes, wondering how this man who stands so visibly enraged before us will react to the teenage girl who is being so rude to him *right now*. Immediacy is one of the keys to the experience of theatrical performance which makes the Performance Reception of drama different from Reception of, for example, an ancient historiographical work extending ineluctably over the innumerable pages of a printed volume. Even Peter Szondi’s famously sophisticated study of Thornton Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner*, which identifies such nuances in the temporal dimension of drama as its spatialization of time, its “abstract evocation” of the passage of time, and the crucial distinction between “narrative time” (which corresponds to the time of the performance) and the “narrated time” covered by the enacted events, nevertheless implies a reaffirmation of the inevitable “presence” of the visible moment, “a moment turned toward the future . . . one that destroys itself for the sake of the future movement.”<sup>73</sup>

This “future” orientation of drama, an aspect of its semi-contingency, is also connected with its political potential. Theater is uniquely poised to make the future seem potentially *controllable*, or at the very least susceptible to intervention. This makes it different even from film, whose non-contingency places it in a different relation to the twin poles of narrative (past) and theater (future). The “what will happen next?” question asked by theater suggests the immanent sense of the power of the collective to alter that

future—a sense powerfully conveyed, if only to be frustrated, by ancient choruses who want to intervene in domestic violence but are unable to actualize their desire. The sense of empowerment gives the theater what, ever since the unorthodox Marxist Ernst Bloch's poignant *Geist der Utopie* (first published at the poignant date of 1918, when German radicals were actually facing acute disappointment), has often been called its “utopian” tendency or signature. This designates its potential for transcending in fictive unreality the social limitations of the moment of its own production. All art can narrate or represent revolution, but only drama has the potential to *enact* through both form and content radical, optimistic, changes in power relations which would be impossible in the society producing the drama. Even alongside its potential for inspecting the worst atrocities and trepidations humankind can imagine, theater offers a sense that the future is *partly* in the hands of those creating it, and that it could be changed for the better. There could be a world where nobody ever killed their spouse or child, and tyrants always fell, if we collectively willed and then enacted such a world into being. The notion that a better way of doing things is *possible*, the creation of an imaginative arena susceptible to the radical act of utopian thinking, the temporary offering that dreams and wishes and fantasies of greater human happiness can be fulfilled—all these belong to live theater as to no other artistic medium.<sup>74</sup>

When it comes to reviving the live theater of previous generations—especially those at the furthest chronological removes—the radical potential of theater is further enhanced by the sheer power of the conception of the *relativity* of all historical phenomena (the major premise of all Vidal-Naquet's works on Reception). The thinker to whom this needs to be traced is yet another product of German idealism, Wilhelm Dilthey, who was originally much influenced by Husserl. After spending much of his life (which began in 1833 but extended into the twentieth century) developing his relativist philosophy of history, he began to

be convinced that understanding the changes which the world has continuously undergone prevents humans from becoming bound irrevocably to any one conviction. Historical awareness makes humans free: “The *historical consciousness* of the *finitude* of every historical phenomenon, of every human or social condition, of the relativity of every kind of faith, is the final step in the liberation of man.”<sup>75</sup> Possibilities that can be developed are revealed by historical understanding, so that when Dilthey says that man is a historical being, he means that man’s historical attitude faces the future instead of gazing into the past.<sup>76</sup> Watching the drama of previous stages of historical development and responding actively to its social and political conundra (as Wolfgang Iser argued so cogently in respect of the lasting impact of Shakespeare’s history plays in *Shakespeares Historien: Genesis und Geltung* [1988]) can thus play a particularly vital role in such a process of historical understanding.

#### VIII. POLITICAL POTENCY

The utopian signature of dramatic art is one of several of its dimensions that have given theater a distinctive role in socio-political history. Theater’s communal consumption lends it a collective aura, but its enacted nature and face-to-face encounters—often confrontations—contribute to what Sontag has called its unique “adversarial power,” its inherent tendency to enact *conflicting* viewpoints or interests.<sup>77</sup> “Why stage declamatory Greeks . . . unless to disguise what one was thinking under a fascist regime?” Sartre asked bluntly in 1944, in reference to the moral conflict he had recently staged in *Les Mouches*.<sup>78</sup> This is one reason why Peter Sellars thinks that an important theatrical event can make effective waves far beyond the cozy world of the performance context: “The most important nights in the theater were seen by only a tiny fraction of the population and yet they have passed into the history of the world.”<sup>79</sup> Antonin Artaud enjoyed reminding his critics of St. Augustine’s censori-

ous comparison of the potency of theater, which induces extraordinary changes in the minds not only of individuals and nations, with the plague which can kill without even destroying individual organs.<sup>80</sup> Examples of literally nation-changing productions of ancient drama in recent decades would include Athol Fugard's *The Island* and Andrej Wajda's *Antyгона*. Theater is also peculiarly egalitarian, subversively so according to Aristophanes when he makes Euripides boast that he has made tragedy "democratic" by allowing his women and slaves, individuals officially silenced in the public discourse of the Athenian city-state, to deliver public speeches and win the public's sympathy (*Frogs* 949–52). But there can be a tension between the progressively "democratic" form of ancient drama and its frequently conservative content, a tension which gives the plays an ideological complexity, a dialogism, that partly explains their perennial attractiveness.<sup>81</sup> The actor's art, as early Christian anti-theatrical polemicists already fumed, also abolishes social boundaries—of class, gender, or ethnicity—by allowing common, even servile players to pretend to be kings, or to enact the humiliation of kings.

Theater has also, historically at least, been available to a far greater percentage of any given population than knowledge of Latin, Greek, or the elite authors who wrote in those languages. Women and non-elite men for centuries spent their hard-earned pennies on acquiring some familiarity with ancient mythology and history from the proletarian pits of Europe's theater and opera houses. To extend the argument briefly beyond ancient drama, the groundlings who cheered on Brutus and Cassius, or leered at Antony and Cleopatra, were "doing classics" quite as vigorously as the learned clerics of Oxenford, immersed in their ancient Rhetorick. But so were the French citizens who flocked to watch François Joseph Talma, the thespian darling of the French Revolution, perform a star turn as Philoctète or Égiste in new versions of Sophocles at the Theater of the Republic. To do Performance History is to excavate a different kind of Influence of the



Classics, a more popular, demotic, and incomparably more widespread influence.

This non-elite past—the traces left on ancient drama not by previous actors or adaptors, but by previous audiences—may therefore also have something to do with the tendency of modern authors in post-colonial countries to turn to ancient European theatrical texts, rather than to epic or lyric, when negotiating the painful part of their cultural inheritance that arrived with their imperial oppressors.<sup>82</sup> Ancient drama, more than any other Greek or Roman material, is now a worldwide phenomenon, an aesthetic language understood throughout much of the global village. As Helene Foley put it in an important discussion, at some point in the twentieth century the Greeks ceased to belong to the West.<sup>83</sup> It is important to the Performance Reception of recent decades to appreciate that that ancient drama now has a role of unprecedented historical importance, since it reaches parts of the world that no other Greek and Roman classics (except via the impending spate of Hollywood epics on ancient mythical or historical themes) can ever hope to reach. There are certainly far more recent Japanese and African versions of Greek drama than of any other ancient medium or genre.<sup>84</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The opening of this essay warned the reader that the discussion of possible models for Performance Reception would be tentative. Although underpinned by a consistent philosophical line which can be traced from Vico's rediscovery of the sensually conveyed wisdom of pagan art, via German idealism to Kierkegaard's aesthetics, Dilthey's historical relativism, Husserlian Phenomenology, Symbolism, and French Existentialism, no doubt it also reads as eccentrically eclectic. It has also adduced the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, theater critics and historians such as Eric Bentley, Michael Goldman, Richard Hornby, and Robert Weiman, literary

theorists including Mikhail Bakhtin (a “Formalist”), Fredric Jameson (a “Marxist”), Jacques Derrida (a “Deconstructionist”), the contemporary titans of the cultural scene Susan Sontag and Peter Sellars, as well as a few classicists who have engaged in similar work to my own (above all, Helene Foley, Lorna Hardwick, and Fiona Macintosh, who have also, along with Pantelis Michelakis, Christopher Rowe, Oliver Taplin, and David Wiles provided great help on an early draft of the essay). This is theory ordered *à la carte*. But its aim is simply to open up discussion amongst classicists by offering an account of the unique status of the medium studied in Performance Reception.

#### NOTES

1. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Simon Goldhill, “Programme Notes,” in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge 1999), 1–29; especially 1–20.

2. There have been several significant contributions, associated particularly with the names of Hellmut Flashar, Pat Easterling, Helene Foley, Simon Goldhill, Lorna Hardwick, Marianne McDonald, Oliver Taplin, and Michael Walton.

3. See A. Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics* (New York 1994), especially page 2, where Green argues that there is an “essential contradiction between a familiar, well-established text and its all-new theatrical idiom,” and that it is precisely this contradiction which marks the contemporary “classical” (a term which for Green also includes Shakespeare, Molière, and Mozart) revival as specific to its own cultural moment. Her theoretical introduction (1–15) is more useful than her rather descriptive actual discussions of American revivals of Greek and Roman Drama in chs. 2 and 3.

4. E. Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York 1975), 150.

5. See pages 430–31 of E. Hall, “The Ancient Actor’s Presence Since the Renaissance,” in P. Easterling and E. Hall (2002), 419–34. A different example would be the Plautine ancestry which Dario Fo claims for the Saturnalian spirit which has conditioned his own politically charged farces: see 39–42 of A. Scuderi, “Updating Antiquity,” in J. Farrell and A. Scuderi (eds.), *Dario Fo: Stage, Text, and Translation* (2000), 39–64.

6. The study of Medea across antiquity in J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston (eds.), *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art* (Princeton 1997) typically did not address the significant life this heroine

lived in the performance arts, from the fifth century all the way to St. Augustine's youthful rendition of *Medea Volans*. L. Hardwick, *Reception Studies (Greece & Rome New Surveys in the Classics no. 33 [Oxford 2003])* is unusual in including a chapter-length section on Reception in the ancient world within her overall discussion of Reception studies.

7. See C. Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge 1993), 7.

8. See E. Hall, "Iphigenia and Her Mother at Aulis: A Study in the Recent Revival of a Euripidean Classic" (forthcoming 2004).

9. See E. Hall (note 5), 432; F. Macintosh "Introduction: The Performer in Performance," in E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and O. Taplin (eds.), *Medea in Performance 1500-2000* (Oxford 2000), 1-31. Also, see E. Hall and F. Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914* (Oxford 2005), ch. 15.

10. See E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), ch. 4.

11. E. Bentley (note 4), 149.

12. Letter of 16 December 1932, quoted in C. Schumacher (ed.), *Artaud on Theater* (London 1989), 722-23.

13. See E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), chs. 6, 4, 17.

14. Vidal-Naquet's essay "Oedipus in Vicenza and Paris" in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1988), 361-80; Hall and Macintosh (note 9), ch. 2.

15. M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff" (first published in Russian in 1970), in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds.), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, TX 1986), 1-7.

16. See Jean-Pierre Vernant's essay "The Tragic Subject: Historicity and Transhistoricity," in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (note 14), 237-47.

17. R. Weiman, *Structure and Society in Literary History*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore and London 1984), especially 46-56.

18. On the longevity of anti-theatricalism as a cultural phenomenon in the west, see J. Barish's brilliant study *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley 1981).

19. M. L. Clarke's usually excellent account of the history of Greek scholarship in England, *Greek Studies in England 1700-1830* (Cambridge 1945) flounders when it comes to its relationship with the 18th-century theater: see E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), ch. 7. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's involvement in theatricals including the *Oresteia*, *Medea*, and *Oedipus* (briefly described in the English translation of his book, *My Recollections* [London 1930], 306-8) is not apparent in his scholarship on the dramatists involved.

20. See also W. Warner, *Menaecmi. A Pleasant and fine Conceited Comedie, taken out of the most excellent wittie poet Plautus: Chosen purposely from out the rest, as least harmefull, and yet most delightfull. Written in English* (London 1595).

21. E. Hall and F. Macintosh 2005 (note 9), ch. 3.
22. English translation published in J. Graham, *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca, NY 1985). See the remarks of Barbara Johnson, "Taking Fidelity Philosophically," in the same volume, 146: "Derrida's entire philosophic enterprise . . . can be seen as an analysis of the translation process at work in studying the *difference* of signification." See also W. Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven and London 1993), 42–43.
23. See R. Johnson, "Many Languages, A Common Passion," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 2002.
24. W. Barnstone, (note 22), 261.
25. W. Barnstone (note 22), 26; for a concise discussion of such currents of thought within Translation Studies see the preface to the 3rd edition of S. Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London and New York 2002), 1–10.
26. See E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), ch. 6; *La Repubblica*, 20 May 2002.
27. E. Fischer-Lichte, "Thinking about the Origins of Theatre in the 1970s," in E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and A. Wrigley (eds.), *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford 2004), 329–60.
28. Helene Foley points out to me that there have, of course, been effective combinations of live actors and puppets, in, for example, the musical *Avenue Q* at the Golden Theater, Broadway, in 2003.
29. E. Bentley (note 4).
30. See e.g., E. Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Role Playing in Greek Drama and Society* (forthcoming), ch. 2.
31. T. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford 2002), xiv, 29, 31.
32. J. Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* (New York 1972), 20; Walter Benjamin eloquently described the absence of the *aura* from film: "for the first time—and this is the effect of film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence; there is no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor." W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London 1970), 231.
33. E. Bentley (note 4), 170–71.
34. M. Goldman, *On Drama: Boundaries of Genre, Borders of Self* (Ann Arbor, MI 2000), 8.
35. M. Goldman (note 34), 10.
36. M. Goldman (note 34), 18; see also M. Goldman, *The Actor's Freedom: Toward a Theory of Drama* (New York 1975), 123.
37. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in Isobel Murray (ed.), *Oscar Wilde* in the series *The Oxford Authors* (Oxford 1989), 222. First published in *The Nineteenth Century* in January 1889.
38. E. Bentley (note 4), 158.

39. It is curious that no comparative study of televised soap opera and Greek tragedy has yet emerged, since the dysfunctional family is the fundamental focus of both genres. See Hall (note 8), 34 and n. 63.

40. L. Hardwick (note 6), 57–59.

41. F. Macintosh, “Alcestis on the British Stage,” *Cahiers du GITA* 14 (2001), 281–308.

42. B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theater as Metaphor* (Bloomington, IN 1982), 11. The Marxist theory of aesthetic value “evaluates” art on a similar criterion of the degree to which it achieves a fully veracious representation of the invisible relations of production, class, and power underpinning each society. But Marxist critics have never to my knowledge argued that theatrical art, as opposed to other forms of art, has any prior claim to value on this criterion.

43. My italics. Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, introd. Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York 1963), 228. See the perceptive comments on Genet’s insistence on the alchemical force of theatrical thinking in Sartre’s 1952 introduction to the novel, also conveniently translated into English in the 1963 volume (7–57), at pages 43–44.

44. Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* 10.15; see S. Moreh, *Live Theater and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (New York 1992), 9. Thanks to Stuart Hall for help on this.

45. On children’s verbal, psychological, and physical participation in the activities they imitate in their play, see K. Walton, “Make-believe, and Its Role in Pictorial Representation and the Acquisition of Knowledge,” *Philosophic Exchange* (1994) 81–95 (modified version reproduced in S. L. Feagin and P. Maynard [eds.], *Aesthetics* [Oxford and New York 1997], 188–96) in reaction to Ernst Gombrich’s famous essay “Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form,” the title essay in Gombrich’s book (London 1965).

46. E. H. Erikson, *Studies of Play* (New York 1975), 668.

47. Moreover, although the Mounet-Sully performance had much to do with his profound personal identification with Oedipus (not just apparent in his compulsion to solve riddles, but also in the fact that in his sixties he referred to his daughter Anna as his “Antigone”), the uses to which he put the Sophoclean text display a literary intimacy with it. See G. Frankland, *Freud’s Literary Culture* (Cambridge 2000), 30–2, 68, 142–3, and especially 206. Anna is called “my faithful Antigone” in a letter to Sandor Ferenczi of 12 October 1928, in E. Freud (ed.), *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873–1939*, trans. T. and J. Stern (London 1961), 382.

48. E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), ch. 12.

49. E. Hall and F. Macintosh (note 9), ch. 12.

50. For an account of which see J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (London 1968), 66.

51. F. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London 1990), 1–3.

52. F. Jameson (note 51), 2.
53. F. Jameson (note 51), 5.
54. A. W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Poetry*, trans. John Black (London 1846), 136.
55. W. N. Bates, *Euripides: A Student of Human Nature* (Philadelphia 1930), 200–1 reports his own Damascene experience on actually seeing a performance of *Trojan Women*. Suddenly a play which had struck him as a miserable concatenation of laments took on extraordinary coherence and power.
56. This essay, originally published in the early 1960s in *Evergreen Review*, is most accessibly republished in S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1994). See her indictment of our contemporary culture, “whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability” (1994), 7, her remarks in an interview published in B. Marranca and G. Dasgupta (eds.), *Conversations on Art and Performance* (Baltimore, MD 1999), 2–9, at page 7.
57. *Republic* 2.373b 5–8 (*mimêtai* = visual artists and poets “and their assistants, rhapsodes, actors, chorus-dancers” as well as the makers of female raiment); 3.392d6 (*mimêsis* = *oratio recta*); 3.392c5 (*mimêisthai* = to use *oratio recta* in impersonating someone else); 3.394e2 (*mimêtikoi* = impersonators, actors); 3.395c5 (*mimêisthai* = to imitate, impersonate, act the role of, be exposed to a theatrical performance; see P. Murray, *Plato on Poetry* (Cambridge 1996), 176 (ad loc.): mimetic literature “has this effect not only on the performer, but also on the listener”; B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theater as Metaphor* (Bloomington, IN 1982), 36.
58. G. Vico, *The New Science*, translated from the third edition (1744) by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. (Ithaca, NY 1948), 295.
59. See S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (= Kierkegaard’s Writings, vol. 3]. Princeton 1987), 42, 68, 117–18, 239, 486–7, and the discussion of his theatrical aesthetics in G. Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (Basingstoke and London 1992), 95–124.
60. Translation taken from James Walter McFarlane (ed.) *The Oxford Ibsen* (Oxford, London, New York, and Toronto 1972), 3. 194.
61. Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 1.56, 4.2; and on the ancient dreams about acting, see P. Easterling “Actor as Icon” in P. Easterling and E. Hall (eds.), *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge 2002), 336–39.
62. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* 5: 340, and 4: 50. See L. Rose, *The Survival of Images: Art Historians, Psychoanalysts, and the Ancients* (Detroit, MI 2001), 79; J.-F. Lyotard, (1977), “The Unconscious as Mise-en-Scène” in Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (eds), *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison, WI 1977), 87–98; and G. Frankland, *Freud’s Literary Culture* (Cambridge 2000), 131.
63. See the discussion of L. Rose (note 62), 76–77.

64. L. Irigaray, "The Stage Setup," trans. Gillian Gill, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY 1985), 243–68. J. Kristeva, "Modern Theater Does Not Take (a) Place," English translation by Alice Jardine and Thomas Gora, in *Sub-stance* 19, no. 19 (1977) 131–34; both are reproduced in T. Murray (ed.), *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (Ann Arbor, MI 1997).

65. Jameson (note 51), 4.

66. This leads Jameson to suggest that such an experience might lie undocumented behind the ideas and works of any number of authors. He wonders whether human nature changed on or about 28 December 1895 (i.e., the date when the Lumière brothers unveiled their Cinematograph in Paris). He goes on to ask whether there was "some cinematographic dimension of human reality always there somewhere in prehistoric life, waiting to find its actualization in a certain high-technical civilization?" (Jameson [note 51], 5). This last question I find highly suggestive, mainly because the way in which Jameson writes about the sensuous experience of cinema is so reminiscent of the way in which writers of previous eras talk about their experience of *theater*, and because he does not even consider considering theater as having fulfilled some, at least, of the "cinematographic dimension of human reality" in the pre-cinematographic world.

67. Performance Reception of live theater is compromised in different ways both by the necessity to study many performances via video recordings, and by many theater professionals' refusal to allow their productions to be recorded at all.

68. See Ar. *Frogs* 303 with scholion; Sannyrion fr. 8 and Strattis fr. 1.2–3 PCG.

69. G. Gilloch *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Oxford, Cambridge, and Malden 2002), 188.

70. On which see F. Zeitlin, "Dionysus in 69," in E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and A. Wrigley (note 27), 49–75.

71. R. Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (London and Toronto 1986), 98–99.

72. S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (London 1953), 215, 307, 258–79, 307.

73. P. Szondi, "The Play of Time: Wilder," in *Theory of the Modern Drama*, trans. and ed. Michael Hays (Minneapolis 1965), 87–91, at 87.

74. On the utopian tendency of art in general and theater in particular see F. Jameson *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca 1981), 290–91, Rose (note 62), 36–42, and especially K. Ryan, *Shakespeare* (New York and London 1989). A rather different case can be made, of course, for the utopian potential of the novel.

75. W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols. 1–12 (Stuttgart and Göttingen 1913–58), 7.290, translated by Plantinga (note 76), 133, from the notes under the heading *Plan der Fortsetzung zum Aufbau der gesichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Plan for a Continuation of "The Construc-

tion of the Historical World in the Geisteswissenschaften”).

76. T. Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London 1980), 133.

77. Sontag quoted in B. Marranca and G. Dasgupta (note 56). See also M. Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton 1988).

78. *Carrefour*, 9 September 1944, quoted in M. Contat and M. Rybalka (eds.), *Sartre on Theater*, trans. Frank Jelinek (New York 1976), 188.

79. See J. O'Mahony, “The Mighty Munchkin” (profile of Peter Sellars), *The Guardian Saturday Review* (20 May 2000), 7.

80. *City of God* 1.32; see C. Schumacher (note 12), 114–15.

81. E. Hall, “The Sociology of Attic Tragedy,” in Pat Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1997), 126.

82. E. Hall, “Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century” in Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley (note 70), 24–5; Hardwick, “Greek Drama and Anti-colonialism: Decolonizing Classics,” in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley, 219–42.

83. H. Foley, “*Tantalus*,” *AJP* 122 (2001), 424.

84. M. Smethurst, “Ninagawa’s Production of Euripides’ *Medea*,” *AJP* 123 (2002), 1–34; K. J. Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy* (Jefferson, NC 2002); Hardwick (note 82); E. Hall (note 8).