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Performing *The Book of Esther* in  
Early Modern Europe

Edited by Chanita Goodblatt

# SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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GHERARDO UGOLINI\*

## Vayos Liapis, Avra Sidiropoulou, eds. *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

Since Hellmut Flashar's pioneering book *Inszenierung der Antike* (1991), studies on modern stagings of ancient Greek drama have multiplied along with the proliferation, in a wide variety of cultural and geographical contexts, of performances/plays inspired, more or less directly, by Attic tragedies of the fifth century BC. *Adapting Greek Tragedy*, edited by Vayos Liapis and Avra Sidiropoulou, brings together contributions by specialists who take stock of the current situation, analyse several exemplary case studies, and reflect theoretically on the increasingly dynamic and problematic/problematising way in which adaptations of Greek tragedy today confront the dramatic genre that flourished in Greece some twenty-five centuries ago. At the heart of the volume is the question of what precisely an 'adaptation' is, what its possible modes of realisation are, and how modern adaptations of Greek tragedies can shed new light on the way we understand our relationship to the classical past by highlighting aspects of modern culture's distance from the civilisation of ancient Greece.

KEYWORDS: Greek tragedy; adaptation; translation; myth; drama; classical canon; Hellmut Flashar

The systematic study of the staging of ancient Greek drama in the modern era is a relatively recent field of research. A crucial moment in its development was the publication in 1991 of the pioneering book *Inszenierung der Antike. Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1990* by the German scholar of Greek Hellmut Flashar, written at a time when professors of classical philology and Greek literature rarely grappled with modern and contemporary plays. Flashar was not only a competent and meticulous scholar of ancient Greek drama, but also an avid theatregoer, and he was firmly convinced of the need for scholars to engage with directors and producers in order to better understand the objects of their research. *Inszenierung der Antike* immediately became the reference work for this field of study, and in some respects has remained so to this day, especially with

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 9781107155701, pp. 436

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regard to the methodological directions which it opened up: analysis of the content and formal characteristics of individual adaptations; framing them in the modern cultural-historical context and in the light of the artistic theories and ethical-political convictions of their authors; comparison between the dramaturgical styles of adaptations and developments in contemporary philology.<sup>1</sup> Flashar's argument traced a historical trajectory with a precise starting point: the staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in 1585 at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, the first attempt to recover the performance practices of ancient theatre, which paved the way for subsequent revivals. He then dealt with the most famous adaptations inspired by Greek tragedy, from classical French theatre to lyric opera, with substantial space given to German culture: Weimar and the 'Greek' performances at the Hoftheater directed by Goethe; the 1841 Potsdam *Antigone*, commissioned by Emperor Friedrich Wilhelm IV and directed by Ludwig Tieck, with music by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, translation by Johann Jakob Christian Donner, and consultation from August Boeckh; the *Musikdramen* of Richard Wagner. It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that the staging of ancient dramas was able to free itself definitively from any classical indebtedness, thanks above all to Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who translated many texts of Greek tragedies into German with a view to their performance while also actively collaborating in the staging of productions (the Berlin *Oresteia* of 1911-1912, staged by Max Reinhardt, is famous, and marked the rediscovery of Aeschylus for European theatre). In the last chapters of the book, Flashar analysed trends in vogue from the 1930s onwards, such as the tendency towards the decontextualisation and de-historicising of Greek theatre (during the period of Hitler's dictatorship).

Conversely, the political dimension became a basic and unavoidable element in many post-war plays (starting with Bertolt Brecht's *Antigone*), while in the following decades the so-called 'director's theatre' became established, whereby the director is authorised to arbitrarily superimpose his direction on the meaning and values of the text performed.

If we have lingered so long on Flashar's book, it is not only to pay tribute to the German scholar who died in August 2022, but to emphasise the novelty of this monograph, which paved the way for a flood of study and research on the subject. *Adapting Greek Tragedy: Contemporary Contexts for Ancient Texts*, edited by Vayos Liapis and Avra Sidiropoulou, both professors at the Open University of Cyprus and specialists in ancient Greek theatre, classical

<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that *Inszenierung der Antike* has undergone a second edition with additions (Flashar 2009) and a series of updates by the same scholar, published in the journal *Gymnasium. Zeitschrift für Kultur der Antike und humanistische Bildung* and subsequently collected in a single volume (Flashar 2018).

reception, and dramatic theory, is the latest important contribution to this long and fascinating history. Those who work on the reception of ancient Greek theatre will find in this book an up-to-date and valuable tool, with the not inconsiderable merit of taking a very broad geographical perspective: in fact, it discusses performances not only produced in the Western cultural contexts we might more traditionally expect, but also from areas such as Japan, China, India, West Africa, South Africa and the Caribbean, where significant adaptations of ancient Greek theatre can also be found.

The first fifty pages of the volume, namely the “Introduction” by Liapis and Sidiropoulou (1-23) and the “Prelude: Adapting the Greek tragic: A Historical Perspective” by Liapis (24-55), are of considerable depth. The effort made by the two editors in their introduction to clarify, from a theoretical point of view, what is meant by ‘adaptation’ with regard to the texts of classical antiquity seems both lucid and timely. Debate on this subject has been very intense, with a progressive development that has shifted the focus from a purely ‘text-centric’ vision to a perspective that focuses above all on the dimension of performance, and thus on visual and scenic aspects. No scholar nowadays considers an adaptation as a mere derivation or reduction of the source text; rather, the text on the one hand and the performance on the other are considered complementary elements in a relationship of constant interaction. The dramatic text has performative potential in itself, and each performance realises this potential in different ways. On the other hand, a new performance results in a new conceptualisation of the text itself.

The term adaptation, moreover, implies a vast quantity of variables, ranging from the simple ‘abridgement’ of the source text as required by the particular needs of the target audience, to ambitious projects that expand and enrich the source text by inserting new characters or themes. ‘Adaptation’ can also constitute transposition into different medium from that of the original, as in the case of a novel or film derived from an ancient play. In this case, as well as in others, the need for the modern author to re-contextualise the content by transferring it into different cultural contexts is evident. The chapter by Katja Krebs (“Definitions: Adaptation and Related Modalities”, 59-76) is devoted precisely to the attempt to understand what is meant by the ‘adaptation’ of an ancient Greek tragedy in a modern performance, by suggesting an articulated distinction between ‘translation’, ‘version’, ‘rewriting’, ‘retelling’, ‘reinvention’, and ‘re-imagination’. This theoretical discussion is effectively applied to three recent productions of Greek plays, taken as paradigmatic case studies: these are Ben Power’s *Medea*, staged at the National Theatre in London in 2014, *Iphigenia Quartet* by Caroline Bird, Suhayla El-Bushra, Lulu Raczka and Chris Thorpe, staged in 2016 at the Gate Theatre in London, and *The Persians*, adapted by Kaite O’Reilly and directed in 2010 by Mike Pearson at the National Theatre of Wales.

Critics have generally spoken of these adaptations now as ‘versions’, now as ‘translations’, and now as more or less faithful ‘adaptations’, with a rather free use of terminology depending on the context. This does not mean that we should give up trying to classify (re)writings or to define the boundaries between adaptation, appropriation, version, etc. But we should be aware that these attempts at definition essentially have to do with modern contexts of reception. It is modern scholars – but also spectators, reviewers, theatre practitioners, etc. – who establish the boundaries between these categories, taking into account the specific relationship each has between source and adaptation: a spectator who is familiar with the source (ancient Greek drama) has a different kind of perspective from that of a spectator who is not familiar with the source. It is important to remember that knowledge of the source text may be of various kinds, especially when canonical works of classical theatre are at stake: it may refer to direct knowledge, based on reading in the original language, but it may also refer to a generally widespread cultural memory, or to other (re)writings of the same source text.

While the purpose of any ‘adaptation’ can be defined as “to reposition the originating text in a new cultural context” (Bryant 2013, 54), there is no unanimously agreed upon notion of ‘adaptation’, given the considerable fluidity and variability of the terminology adopted. Certainly, translation is one of the most common and discussed forms of ‘adaptation’, so Lorna Hardwick’s essay on “Translation and/as Adaptation” (110-30), which reflects in theoretical and methodological terms on the topic, finds a fitting place in the volume. Obviously, the translation of a text, however faithful it may be to the original, always consists of a work of ‘carrying across’ (translation) from one cultural-verbal context to another, and therefore always necessarily involves a certain degree of recodification, becoming a creative work in itself. Anyone who translates the text of a Greek tragedy from the fifth century BC for a modern staging, intended for a modern audience, is obliged to reconfigure the meaning of the original to adapt it to modern attitudes and tastes. In particular, Hardwick analyses the relationship between the target language and the source language from several angles, including formal aspects, differences in socio-cultural context, and the effect of translations on the reading or viewing public.

A number of crucial issues emerge from the various essays collected in the volume and the case studies that are put forwards for analysis. One of these concerns the relationship between the practice of adapting Greek tragedies for the stage and the questioning of the traditional canon. In fact, in many cases, adaptations of ancient Greek dramas prompt both authors (playwrights, directors, etc.) and spectators to reconsider their perception of the source texts, which are often regarded uncritically as timeless ‘classics’ of immortal value. Indeed, it is precisely adaptation that can contribute to



the discussion and challenging of the cultural and ideological assumptions of the source text, rendering the notion of the 'classic' as an authoritative and unchanging model completely inadequate, while offering a dissonant and alienating view of works that we lazily regard as familiar (on this particular type of 'negotiation' between fidelity to the established canon and the affirmation of alienating points of view, cf. Peter Meineck's essay, "Forsaking the Fidelity Discourse: the Application of Adaptation", 77-109). The issue takes on explosive contours when the staging of classical Greek dramas is reconnected to non-Western ethno-cultural contexts. A resounding case in point is that of the Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi, who attempted with some of his epoch-making plays (*The Trojan Women*, *The Bacchae*, *Clytemnestra*) to adapt the ancient Greek tradition to the stylised and ritualised language of traditional Japanese Noh theatre. In a similar vein, mention may be made of *Les Atrides* by Ariane Mnouchkine, in which the saga of Agamemnon and Orestes is saturated with elements typical of oriental dramaturgy (costumes, masks, make-up, gestures and movements), Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's gospel version of *Oedipus at Colonus* (*The Gospel at Colonus*, 1983), in which the Sophoclean drama is presented as a sermon recited by African-American singers, and of course the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka's version of the *Bacchae* (*The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite*) from 1973, in which the Greek tradition is syncretically contaminated with Christian and indigenous Nigerian traditions. The significance of this specific type of adaptation is particularly emphasised in chapters 10 ("Adaptations of Greek Tragedies in Non-Western Performance Cultures" by Erika Fischer-Lichte, 272-98) and 11 ("Culture Identities: Appropriations of Greek Tragedy in Post-Colonial Discourse" by Elke Steinmeyer, 299-328).

Another element worth reflecting on is the process of modernisation that adaptations of ancient plays often entail. This was, of course, already something that ancient playwrights were doing in their stagings (which were in fact 'adaptations' of myth), and it is quite common in modern plays inspired by Greek tragedies: modernisation engages a dialectical dynamic between the context of the ancient myth, perceived as 'original', and contemporary issues, by provoking an interpretative interaction between the text and the modern play, "whereby the modern work is illuminated by ancient myth but also causes us to reinterpret the myth it appropriates" ("Introduction", 9). Two chapters in the volume deal with the issue of modernisation, that of Simon Perris ("Violence in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy", 247-71), and that of Anastasia Bakogianni ("Trapped between Fidelity and Adaptation? On the Reception of Ancient Greek Tragedy in Modern Greece", 329-54). The former shows, through a series of case studies (among others, Steven Berkoff's *Greek* from 1980, and Sarah Kane's 1996 *Phaedra's Love*), how physical violence is often displayed in modern reinterpretations of Greek tragedies, since there

is no prohibitive restraint, as was the case in ancient theatrical practice in the fifth century BC. Often in these cases, violence is an expressive tool that relates to themes of social marginalisation and political and ethnic conflict. Bakogianni's essay is devoted to the reception of ancient Greek drama in modern Greece, a unique kind of reception due to the 'special relationship' between the Greek culture of today and its past, which is characterised by the tension between a more traditional line, attentive to the foundational and formative values of tragedy, and a more modern and experimental one that aims at a 'creative' re-appropriation of Greek drama and does not hesitate to use ancient texts to reflect current issues.

Staging for the theatre constitutes a very particular case of adaptation, because it involves a series of negotiations not only with the original source text, but also with previous performances or adaptations of that text. It is a process of appropriation that often produces more doubt and uncertainty than security. The essays by Sidiropoulou ("Adaptation as a Love Affair: The Ethics of Directing the Greeks", 131-54) and Jane Montgomery Griffiths ("Compromise, Contingency, and Gendered Reception: The Case of the Malthouse's *Antigone*", 206-26) discuss the problem of directorial freedom vis-à-vis the 'classical' text being worked on, highlighting the possibility of a wide range of variables, from absolute fidelity to global re-interpretation. Symptomatic in this respect is the analysis of versions of *Antigone* made in Australia in recent decades in the light of developments in feminist and gender theory and practice.

Finally, a point that is rightly taken into consideration is the growing trend of multimedia stagings of Greek tragedies. This is discussed in depth by Peter A. Campbell in his chapter "Technology, Media, and Intermediality in Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy" (227-46). The presence of video cameras and/or screens on which images and videos are projected is the defining element of productions such as Katie Mitchell's *The Oresteia* (1999), Jan Fabre's *Prometheus – Landscape II* (2011), or Davide Livermore's stagings of Euripides' *Helen* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2019) and the *Oresteia* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2021 and 2022). The use of technology and the simultaneous presence of theatre and film can, on the one hand, make the performance more stimulating, while on the other it induces the spectator to reflect on the spatio-temporal relations of the story represented.

The quality of the collected contributions, the substantial size of the volume, and the accuracy of the editors, establish *Adapting Greek Tragedy* as a standard text, destined to become a point of reference for the foreseeable future. Among the book's merits, it is also worth mentioning the presence of an "Interlude" (157-81), edited by Sidiropoulou and entitled "Speaking Up: Theatre Practitioners on Adapting the Classics". This is a collection of interviews with three leading directors of the international theatrical

avant-garde (Charles L. Mee, Suzuki Tadashi, Ivo Van Hove), who discuss various issues related to their direct experience of staging Greek tragedies. The voices of the directors are an excellent and effective supplement to the theoretical analyses presented in the chapters of the first and second parts of the book. Above all, however, the editors' effort to arrive at a definition of the concept of 'adaptation', understood as a complex and layered process in which the target text challenges notions of authenticity and authorship by reshaping and transforming the source text, is commendable. This is, of course, a potentially infinite process, since each adaptation can in turn give rise to new adaptations.

*Translation by Carla Suthren*

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