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*What is a Greek Source  
on the Early English Stage?  
Fifteen New Essays*

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi and Tania Demetriou



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# Introduction

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI

Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it.  
Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch  
than most men could from the whole British Museum.  
(T.S. Eliot 1920, 47)

## A Greek Spirit: Reading Readers

This is not a book on Shakespeare and Plutarch or the Greeks, although it will deal with all of them, but T.S. Eliot's famous lines on how Shakespeare engaged with the past through Plutarch introduces some key questions this book is interested in: what is meant by "absorbing" the Greek past and what is implied by metaphors suggesting taking in or soaking up, incorporating or assimilating what Eliot calls "essential"? Eliot's images, like all critical terminology attempting to convey ideas of sourcing,<sup>1</sup> are not devoid of implications about how we describe cultural phenomena of textual conversations across time. Talking about the dialogue between the Athenian stage of the fifth century BCE and the early London stage, Gordon Braden voiced something many people have grown up with as a given: "[o]n one level there has always been a sense that they ask to be thought of together" (2017, 103). Perhaps Ben Jonson was of the same opinion when he paired his famous criticism of Shakespeare's "small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*" with a

1 On the proliferation and connotations of different words defining a still debated notion of source, see Miola 2003 and, more recently, Maguire and Smith 2015.

calling forth of “thund’ring *Æschilus*, / *Euripides*, and *Sophocles*” alongside “*Paccuvius*, *Accius*, him of *Cordova* dead” as Shakespeare’s apt companions. Although, as Charles Martindale has pinpointed, Shakespeare may be a bad place to start any discussions of the presence of Greek tragedy in early English drama, his “lesse Greeke”, in fact, invites us to consider what it meant to know Greek at the time (Martindale 2017, 169), and possibly what Greek literature meant for an English audience when, as now, Greek texts could imply texts *not in* Greek.

These questions fall within the remit of this book, which concerns how we can interpret a Greek source – and what a Greek source means – in the context of early English theatre. A recent scholarly reappraisal of the presence of Greek texts in England has revived a long-debated interest in the role of classical culture and humanism compared to what happened on the continent. This book takes up this topic by exploring the implications and interferences of our critical perspectives in studying the traffic between Greek literature and early English drama. Still talking about Shakespeare and the Greeks in the article mentioned above, Braden rightly observed that not only are “connections . . . difficult to search for, all but impossible to search for systematically”, but they are also much dependent on “the stuff in [our] passive memory” that we wait “for something to activate” (106). Of course, this is a question that goes beyond Shakespeare’s conversation with the Greeks, encompassing reception studies in general. No twentieth-century contribution on the subject, Braden argues, from comparative analysis of Greek and Shakespearean plays by H.D. Kitto (1956), Tom Driver (1960), and Adrian Poole (1987), to Michael Silk’s perception of a “strange relationship” (2004) between them, and Emrys Jones’ detective-driven analysis of parallels in the admitted absence of “conclusive evidence” (1977, 105), allows one to make final claims on actual conversations – in Braden’s vivid filmic metaphor, we have “no smoking gun” (2017, 109). This is true for authors other than Shakespeare too, but Shakespeare’s case is especially revealing precisely because it is at the same time very distant and very close to Greek theatre. The collection of studies on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* I edited in 2019 questioned precisely mutual resonances as well as differences between Shakespeare and Sophocles. It situated

them within a space of intersections prompting readers to ask what it means and why it matters to look at them together beyond source hunting through verbal echoes. It interrogated how considering them on a par may illuminate their individual concerns reciprocally and how one may have spurred critical readings through the other (see e.g. Murnaghan 2019). This is an example of how the traffic between the Athenian and the London stage may be examined from different perspectives that remain conscious of concerns about the lack of positivistic evidence of tangible borrowings, but are also aware of the need to go beyond an interpretation of English drama as exclusively tied to its Medieval and popular roots (see e.g. Weimann 1978). Once ascertained that Greek texts were known and dealt with in sixteenth-century England in ways long underestimated, other issues have come to the fore: first and foremost *whether* they really mattered for early modern theatre and *how*.

Thus, a new interest in the Greek textual presences in England has sparked off a surge of studies that have fostered a convergence of historical approaches to the spread on these works in different quarters, from schools to universities and printing houses, as well as to how performance practices in academic circles influenced aristocratic and commercial drama (Norland 2009 and 2013; Demetriou and Pollard 2017, 3). Groundbreaking research has been carried out in this sense by Micha Lazarus, who has added important pieces to our knowledge of the teaching of Greek as well as to the role of the German influence on the English reception of Sophocles and the shaping of Christian drama from ancient roots (2015a, 2016, 2020). Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard have drawn attention to the receptions of Homer and Greek tragedy emphasising that “by the sixteenth century’s final decades, the printing, adaptation, and performance of these texts had converged in England’s learned theatrical circles as a vibrant and avant-garde site of engagement” (2017, 5). Pollard (2017) has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt the relevance of Greek tragedies featuring female protagonists with a particular focus on Euripides. Colin Burrow has engaged with memory and reading, furthering the argument that imitating authors “raises questions about how different readers analyse and remember the texts that they read, about how shared practices of writing and interpretation grow and mutate, and about how

different writers in different periods have had different concepts not just of what authorship is, but of what the central characteristics of individual authors might be” (2019, 3). Within the ongoing 2017 PRIN project on *Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama*, Alessandro Grilli and Francesco Morosi (2023) have offered a contrastive analysis of self-conscious uses and display of meta-performance in Aristophanes and Ben Jonson, paving the way for an interpretation of ancient satire percolating into early modern comedy through occulted forms of Latin mediation. In turn, Marco Duranti (2022) has grappled with the function of paratexts of Greek editions published in England, offering a new perspective on the comparative lack of editions of Greek drama texts compared to the continent (cf. Demetriou and Pollard 2017a and 2017b; Pollard 2017). If duly considered, Duranti’s claim that the interest lay not so much in philological accuracy as in “the education of the ruling class” (2022, 55) may open new paths of inquiry into the learning of the language, the development of rhetorical skills, and absorption of the values useful to prospective statesmen, bureaucrats, clergymen as part of an “overall project of promotion of the Anglican faith and the monarchy, seen as two sides of the same coin” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup>

This particular case concerns the publication and performance of texts in Greek. But this is not the only way in which Greek literature came to be known in the Renaissance. Latin and vernacular translations were possibly the most common *loci* where Greek texts were encountered; other forms of mediation were also crucial, from rewritings to adaptations in different genres and in multiple languages. One question that needs to be kept in mind, therefore, is what we mean by a ‘Greek source’ in the Renaissance context where “sophisticated intertextuality uses” (Demetriou and Pollard

<sup>2</sup> The following is only a selected list of relevant publications in alphabetical order, in addition to the ones quoted in these pages: Bate 2019; Burrow 2004 and 2018; Demetriou and Pollard 2017a contain the following about Homer and Greek tragedy, besides Braden and Martindale’s articles just quoted: Coffin 2017, Kenward 2017, Miola 2017, Peyré 2017, Whittington 2017; Demetriou and Valls-Rassell 2021; Dewar-Watson 2004, 2008, 2010, 2018; Duranti 2021; Ewbank 2005; Hopkins 2020; Kerrigan 2018; Lazarus 2015b; Martindale and Taylor 2004; Martindale 1990; Miola 1992, 2004; Peyré 2020; Pollard 2012.

2017, 3) went beyond classical texts while including them in various mediated forms, and where polygenetic and elaborate dialogues provided a melting pot for the shaping of early English drama.

Discussing the peculiar case of George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh's presentation of their *Jocasta* as an Englished Euripides to the audience of Gray's Inn in 1566, possibly acquainted with the Greek tragedian, Emrys Jones intriguingly asked why the play should have been perceived as especially Greek. The answer was that the "qualities which were unfamiliar to them", that is, the non-Senecan ones, were what made for the play's sense of Greekness. The passage is worth quoting in full:

One of H.B. Charlton's arguments [*The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy*, Manchester University Press 1946, or. ed. 1921] against Greek influence in Renaissance tragedy was that translators into Latin or the vernaculars invariably 'Senecanized' their Greek subjects . . . But it does not follow that if it [*Jocasta*] seems 'Senecan' to us, it also seemed 'Senecan' to its audiences and readers. They may have well taken for granted the qualities we call 'Senecan', but have been all the more alert to those other qualities which were unfamiliar to them – the 'Greek' ones . . . They would presumably have believed that they were seeing a Greek play, and – despite the many departures from the original text – they would have been right: they would have been seeing something essentially Euripidean; they may even have been closer to the spirit of the original play than we can. Charlton's argument falters perhaps through a failure to grant the sixteenth century the chance of making its own leaps into the past despite what a modern classical scholar might consider the crudity of its means. (1977, 105-6)

Jones was making a fine point here which has not been considered enough, and is exemplary of issues this book deals with. In light of the popularity of Lodovico Dolce at Gray's Inn as well as of the Italian debate on classical tragedy, it seems unlikely that anyone acquainted with Euripides should have perceived anything un-Senecan as Greek instead of as an Italian re-elaboration of classical drama, one which was already quite well-known since the early sixteenth century. After all, as Robert Miola rightly put it, this play was "three hands and three tongues removed from the original

Greek” (2002, 34). How far removed it was conceptually from the Euripidean ancestor it claimed derivation from is apparent in the play’s overall Renaissance and Christian relocation in ways that go far beyond the kind of Christianised Greek tragedy that penetrated England from Wittenberg.<sup>3</sup> As Miola has also argued, “Dolce’s titular substitution indicates a refocussing of the tragic interest” (2002, 35) that could have hardly been perceived as primarily Senecan. Dolce added to the Euripidean play a sacrificial scene on stage derived from Seneca’s *Oedipus*, but he replaced the Senecan ox with a goat, an animal traditionally imbued with Greek connotations going back to the origins of Greek theatre itself. Could such a detail be possibly interpreted as genuinely Greek rather than as Dolce’s own manipulation of the Senecan scene with a gesture to an abstract idea of Greek theatre? The substitution of the ox with a goat is a minor detail, but one that calls for attention when one is interested in the Greek/Roman alternative within the stratification of mediations and layers of receptions of the ancient past (Bigliuzzi and Suthren forthcoming). The second point is whether there was a prioritising of Senecan over Italian filters and why, and, therefore, how the audience at Gray’s Inn could have interpreted “the many departures” of this English Euripides from the Euripides they may have known (Collinus’s 1541 Latin edition being one of the best candidates). Thirdly, what may be interpreted to be as “essentially Euripidean” and for whom: early modern spectators or contemporary critics? And in this case how can we fully recover their position without projecting ours onto theirs? Finally, can we pin down an authorial ‘essence’ and where can it be found?

Speaking about similarities between Shakespeare’s style and Greek drama, Gordon Braden remarked that Antony’s famous reflection on the changing shape of the clouds in *Antony and Cleopatra* is a close example of “what a reader of Plutarch’s *Lives* might take in about Greek tragedy: this is how they talked on the Athenian stage” (2017, 118). Braden’s reference is to a passage in the life of Demetrius taken from a lost play of Sophocles where Menelaus, like Antony, betrays a feeling of losing himself like “the

3 On the Christian reception of ancient drama with special reference to the Wittenberg tradition see Miola 2014 and 2019; Lazarus 2020.

moon that changes in shape from day to day” (North’s translation, 1579, 980; Braden 2017, 17). This situation, for Braden, is in no way referable to how characters talk

on the Senecan stage (if there was a Senecan stage). Senecan tragedy is too stringent for it, too tightly focused on its scenarios of dominance and suffering and the iron grip of fate. Greek tragedy has a looser weave, with a fuller sense of human life, especially communal life, and more variety and room for play in the way things fit together. (117-18)

Braden’s comment implies a family resemblance of sorts, suggesting that Greekness, or what we can say is essentially Greek, resides in “the sense of human life” conveyed by Greek plays. All we hear at this point is a character speaking in a simile. Should we assume that this is what the Greekness of Greek tragedy boils down to, and does this cover how all characters talk on stage? Braden further ventures,

without feeling that I am saying anything greatly controversial, that something like that characterizes classical Greek literature in comparison with Latin: there is just more to it. A dramatist of Shakespeare’s instincts could have responded to it when it came into view. For the period we are considering here, Greek tragedy remained mostly on a distant horizon, but it was visible and it had inspiration to offer. (118)

Differently from Michael Silk’s contention that direct sources matter the most, Braden argues here that there is possibly little sense in distinguishing them from texts “mediated through classical Latin sources and . . . through Renaissance culture in general” (Silk 2004, 241). A case like Plutarch’s, for instance, which is replete with both references and quotations from Greek tragedy, would blur the difference between them, although Plutarch is clearly taken as a mediator selecting, alluding to, and presenting Greek tragedy in fragments.<sup>4</sup> After all, as Sasha Roberts (2003), and more recently

4 Besides North’s Plutarch, Braden counts 405 citations from Greek tragedy in Erasmus’ *Adagia* (1500-1536) and 6 quotations from five plays of Sophocles in Thomas Watson’s *Ekathompathia* (1582), to mention but a few (2017, 112).

Robert Miola (2019) and Carla Suthren (2020, 64) have underlined, early modern readerly habits were different from our own, and commonplace reading through selected *sententiae*, marked-out passages, and marginalia made for a large portion of readerly interests. Those individual parts could often be, as in the case of Plutarch or Erasmus, what early moderns largely knew of Greek tragedy – a mediated source carrying “within them some of the DNA of the work and culture that produced them” (Braden 2017, 112). Along these lines, Suthren has recently offered a discussion of how an English reader would have gained a picture of Euripides specifically from reading Plutarch’s works (2023 IPS Conference on *Translating Plutarch*). This leads us back to Braden’s remark on the affinity between the Sophoclean passage and Antony’s speech through Plutarch. It now appears clearer why the one could have been a ‘tragic’ source of inspiration for the other, and why it qualifies specifically as Greek – Plutarch mentions Sophocles. Whether this was *essentially* un-Roman, however, remains slippery.

What the language of “essences” and “spirits” evoked so far seems to entail is in fact something that may be rephrased with a clearer view of what we are looking for. For instance, we may talk about virtual meanings embedded in texts that are identifiable by ways of patterns of implied reading: structured constructs within the text that allow for subjective responses, while gearing them to the texts’ own structures and reading instructions (Iser 1978). In Wolfgang Iser’s words, by virtue of the observer’s standpoint according to which authors organise their representation,

the reader is situated in such a position that he can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him. But since this meaning is neither a given external reality nor a copy of an intended reader’s own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader. A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness. (1978, 38)

The classical receptions we are dealing with in this book, of course, complicate the process, because we are not interpreting Greek



texts, but their early modern receptions. We are meta-readers, readers of readers (Bigliuzzi 2023), and this adds to the difficulty of considering how different horizons of expectation located at different times in the processes of reception may interfere with each other (Martindale 2006).<sup>5</sup> This also adds to the fact that the contexts of reading are themselves traversed and shaped by reading policies and practices, structured values, as well as power discourses and discourses of resistance in Foucault's sense. Such a stratified network of forces and layered ways of seeing the world dependent on cultural contexts and discursive practices necessarily interfere with structured forms of textual readings as described by Iser. And this is something that complicates exponentially the question of how to talk about 'Greek sources' – something that still awaits to be articulated through a clear vocabulary and set of criteria.

Iser is interested in meaning-making, and this is connected with schemata, styles, patterns, points of view, language uses. In this sense, Jones' reference to the "spirit" of the Euripidean play conveyed by the English *Jocasta* through Dolce's Italian *Giocasta* – which also implies different dramaturgical and conceptual conventions – invites reflection on whether we can transcend the differences it makes if a play derives from a non-Euripidean Greek text in a non-Greek language. Does it affect in any way the sense of its 'Greekness', whatever this may mean? Is the impact the same as Thomas North's fourteener translation of Sophocles' passage included by Plutarch in the Life of Demetrius, adding to it an irrefutable English veneer?<sup>6</sup> Martindale has pointed out that, in large part, early modern responses to Greek literature were mediated by Latin or vernacular languages, and that Latin syntax affected the sense of the original as well as the writing in English of those who studied Latin closely, as in Christopher Marlowe's case (2017, 171, 173). This kind of remark shifts the question from whether Greek texts (meaning texts either in Greek or circulating in different languages) were present in early modern England, to

5 On the notion of horizons of expectation see Jauss 1982; for a recent reappraisal of reception studies in relation to Shakespeare see Wood 2020.

6 For a discussion of the reception and reinvention of classical metres in early English drama, see Bigliuzzi 2021, and references therein.

whether they *did have* an impact on the literary uses of English and, in turn, whether these afforded *new visions* of Greek works (172).

Such a perspectival change is tell-tale of a resurgence of interest in classical receptions in early modern English culture in ways that mark a step beyond the basic question of whether Greek texts circulated in England, how they did, and whether their knowledge of the original language had any cultural currency. The new question is whether either really *mattered*. This is another way to say that perhaps now we may be less interested in whether ideas of “classical” literature – meaning specifically Greek – circulated at all in early modern England, than in what “classical” meant and how it sounded like. Stephen Orgel has answered these questions by pinpointing the cultural value of the historical construction of both, referable to how the early moderns located themselves in history and constructed the other as a way of affirming themselves: “The meaningful re-creation of the past requires the semiotics of the present. Anachronism is essential to the very notion of historical relevance itself, which assumes that the past speaks to, and is in some way a version of, the present” (2018, 58). Orgel’s claim entails the larger question about what it would “mean for the principles of humanism to inform literature in the vernacular – how could English literature become ‘classical’, not only classical in imitating the ancients, but classical in the sense subsequently applied to music, classical as opposed to popular, classical as formal, serious, and therefore good” (2021a, 2).

The present book belongs to this stage in the study of classical receptions in early English theatre. It is concerned not so much with whether we can speak of Greek texts in England, as with what a Greek text and a Greek source meant and which vocabulary may be used to describe them; how ideas of Greekness came about, and how they may now be pinned down textually and culturally; finally, how these affected the construction of early modern drama by openly comparing and contrasting Greek with Roman models, or silently subsuming refined intertextual dialogues across different genres, languages, and cultural milieux. The chapters into which the book is divided display an array of perspectives. They begin with the observation that scholars often limit their source study to lexical echoes and tend to reject anything that does not prove to be

irrefutable evidence. All essays go beyond this assumption through individual empirical studies as well as the use of a more technical language attempting to codify the numerous ways in which texts can interact with one another with a view to overcoming the lexical bias of traditional source studies. All of them cut across forms of mediation discussed in the whole book. The way they have been grouped into sections highlights dominant concerns without dismissing the essays' sharing one and the same interest in the same ideational and polygenetic engagement with what a Greek source is on the early English stage.

### **Authorities vs Sources**

The second volume of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* prefaces the narratives with a list of "Authorities from whence these novelles be collected and in the same avouched" (1575, Avir). The word "authorities" stands for what sources mean for us, and the list includes Greek and Roman, as well as French, Italian and Spanish narratives – it begins with Strabo and ends with Antonio de Guevara. Starting from a discussion of what an "authority" was in the Renaissance, and how Painter used this word without hierarchical implications, in "Invisible Books: Shakespeare and 'Narrative Sources'" Colin Burrow revises the notion of "fact" traditionally interpreted as irrefutable evidence in a forensic demonstration, to ask "what an early modern 'fact' or thing done look like, if it were stripped bare of 'circumstantial' detail, or if the time when or the persons who acted were all changed, while the nature of the action remained the same" (x). In *Imitating Authors* (2019) Burrow argued that formal imitation encompasses structures and rhythms as well as words; in this chapter, he contends that de-circumstantialised narrations provide narrative facts hardly identifiable as traditional sources behind ornamented and elaborately refashioned stories, in ways that allow us to say that George Petty's tale of Alcestis provides "suggestive connections with *The Winter's Tale*" (61). Narrative sources, differently from Bullough's traditional approach, may be viewed as summaries or digests, *fabulae* stripped of ornaments, derived from cumulative, rather than alternative, cultural

influences. In this sense, the novella culture, to which Shakespeare deeply belongs, invited the fusion of contemporary European as well as ancient Greek and Roman stories asking for circumstantial ornamentation to the extent of occulting the books behind them, making them “invisible”.

What oriented the creation of circumstances as well as their ideational and ideological import, though, remains open to debate and this needs individual scrutiny of choices. Summaries and digests are never neutral, but the product of selection and, in turn, ideational and ideological assumptions. In discussing *Titus Andronicus*' debt to Euripides' *Hecuba*, Emrys Jones underlined the affinity of the dramatic structures of both, each consisting of “two movements of feeling, the first dominated by passionate suffering, the second by purposeful revenge” (1977, 97). This is the kind of imitational attitude referable to the imitation of style Burrow talks about (2019). But it can also be argued that the Greek *Hecuba* not only suggests dramatic solutions,<sup>7</sup> but also emphasises questions of justice at the core of the play in ways that bring centre-stage issues of wild justice and the collapse of Roman *pietas* relevant to contemporary political and legal concerns. This issue is embedded in the play's own texture in ways that signal affinity with one particular version of that story: Euripides'. Elsewhere I argued that the either/or alternative does not replace concurrence and polygenesis, but this does not exclude preferences for circumstantial choices (Bigliazzi 2018).

Thus when we hear an anonymous prologue, displaced from the liminal space of prologues to the middle of act 2 of *The Warres of Cyrus* (1594), claim the performative prestige of a singing Greek chorus compared to the lamenting, hybrid, neo-Senecan one, we are called on to distinguish circumstantially between ancient models bearing competing ideological values: the values of acknowledged antiquity they were circumstantially invested with. This is part of my discussion of a strange passage in this play as a unique document about how to perform the classical chorus in an ancient manner

7 In this respect Jones has pointed out that differently from Ovid, Euripides could provide a “structure . . . that could be imitated and adapted to a modern theatre. The structure of Ovid's episode, on the other hand, is one proper to narrative poetry, not drama” (1977, 103).

within a text that, as it stands, has no chorus. In “The Strange Case of the Singing Chorus that Was Not There. On the Authority of Authorities”, I question the notion of authority by looking at how the reception of a key portion of ancient drama stood for what was received as being “classical”, suggesting different degrees of ancient authority and layers of antiquity related to performance practices with very peculiar contemporary implications. In the particular circumstance of Blackfriars performances, a singing chorus was not devoid of political and cultural connotations. Its value appears against the backdrop of what we may deduce the early moderns understood of the ancient chorus from the encoding of choruses in contemporary Greek and Roman editions, as well as what we now may understand about the performance of early modern neo-Senecan dramas. This is a typical example of the meta-readership mentioned above, modern scholars being not only the readers of those early modern plays but also of how early modern readers read editions of Greek and Roman tragedy. In turn, this obscure document shows concerns about a performing style that acquires the status of the kind of meta-performance Grilli and Morosi talk about in their 2023 book on Ben Jonson and Aristophanes, as opposed to metatheatrical stances.<sup>8</sup> The strange prologic speech we find astray in the *Warres of Cyrus* claims this kind of articulation for a singing chorus “that is not there”, whose meta-performative characteristics we can only glimpse through its intertextual allusion to a Greek chorus.

The authority of mediation with a hierarchical sense close to the one of the claimed precedence of this singing chorus (less so to the unprioritised meaning of Painter’s “authorities” from which Burrow takes his starting point), is also the topic of Jane Raisch’s

8 “. . . meta-performance (such as, for instance, any form of celebration within the play) is not the same thing as metatheatre (that is, any explicit self-conscious reference to the play as a play and to the playwright’s, or the actors’, work). While metatheatre and the breaking of the fourth-wall stress the difference between first-level diction and reality, meta-performative segments stress the difference between first-level diction and second-level diction. In other words, meta-performance does not impinge at all on dramatic ‘illusion’, but provides a further articulation thereof.” (Grilli and Morosi 2023, 44-5).

“Classicism as Medievalism: Gower & Mediation in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*” and Alessandro Grilli’s “An Idea of Old Comedy: Ben Jonson’s Metatextual Appropriation of Aristophanes”. Raisch engages with “a display of cultural mediation” exploring the exhibited stratification of layers of receptions starting from the choric figure of John Gower and his show of medieval knowledge of an ancient story. Instead of reading the play as genuinely engaging with the invention of medievalism or instead with a Hellenistic representation of the Mediterranean world, as critics have often done, this chapter takes a middle stand suggesting the centrality of the act of mediation itself as a thematisation of reception tout court. In this sense, Shakespeare’s *Pericles* becomes an epitome of indirect forms of cultural reception beginning with the narrative function of Gower as its dramatic chorus “situated in a kind of representational limbo” (114), himself consulting authors and books and, thus, displaying how the Greek world was accessed by Medieval culture.

With Alessandro Grilli’s chapter we approach intertextual dialogues through meta-textuality as a peculiar form of imitation in the guise of comment or, better say, the kind of relation that a text entertains with the *idea* “of the text to be taken as a model” (133). Grilli’s purpose is to demonstrate that Ben Jonson’s early production was possibly more familiar with critical texts relating to Aristophanes – Horace, in particular – than with Aristophanes’ own plays, suggesting that what he had in mind was an abstract idea of his comedies as forerunners of Roman satire in the way Horace presented Old Attic Comedy in his *Satires* and *Ars Poetica*. Thus, while in the previous chapter Raisch shows how Shakespeare exhibits reception in *Pericles* as a mediated, indirect practice, in this chapter Grilli discusses how the Horatian mediation is assumed, yet not showcased, by Ben Jonson as a strategy to situate his early plays under the aegis of Aristophanes’ authority. Grilli demonstrates that the imitation at work here entails structural and, above all, ideological transformations. In other words, the ideological updating resides in deviations and corrections that not only prove that Aristophanes had been read, but *how* it had been read and transformed, and for what purpose. In brief, “Jonson’s Aristophanism at this stage is not so much dependent on Aristophanes as on an *image of* Aristophanes that Jonson derives from other authors, primarily Horace” (148).

This first section closes on Evgeniia Ganberg's study of examples of the early modern staging of the Trojan War, from George Peele's *The Arraignement of Paris* (1584) to William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* (1632), James Shirley's *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (1659), and Elkanah Settle's *The Siege of Troy* (1707). The attention now shifts from the imitation of narratives, performing styles, mediated notions of the Greek world and Greek authors, as in the previous chapters, to a specific stylistic figure standing for the typically Homeric epic. In "Of gentle and ignoble, base and kings': the Transformations of the Homeric Simile on the Early Modern English Stage", Ganberg discusses the reprises of the formal epic trope of juxtaposing the noble and the lofty with the low and the common as a typically Homeric trademark of a comparative logic challenging ideas of heroic distinction.

### Receiving, Adapting, Resisting Models

Moving beyond issues of authority, the book's second focus is on selected examples of uses of Greek material – how it was received, adapted, but also resisted. Francesco Dall'Olio's chapter on the reception of Herodotus on stage ("An Empire equall with thy mind': the 'Persian Plays' and the Reception of Herodotus in Renaissance England") explores how mediated forms of Herodotus' *Histories* were appropriated by Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1569), Richard Farrant's *The Warres of Cyrus* (1594) and William Alexander's *Croesus* (1604). Dall'Olio explores how this material was used to address political questions relevant at the time, with particular attention to good and bad kingship as well as imperial politics. The chapter touches on the question of how to represent tyranny on stage and how received historiographic narratives, such as Xenophon's and Herodotus', could intersect contemporary political concerns.

The Persian plays Dall'Olio deals with also entail generic adaptation, from history to drama. Francesco Morosi takes up this question in his discussion of a different type of adaptation where Aristophanes no longer surfaces as a metatextually mediated authoritative idea in Ben Jonson's comedy (as shown by Grilli), but

as a component of the two plotlines in his *Staple of News* – the other one being typically Menandrian. Neither Dall’Olio nor Morosi engage with verbal echoes, but with stories. In Ben Jonson’s case, his intertextual strategies appear to pivot around an Aristophanic mental model which was brought to interact with other ancient Roman models, as well as with early modern comedic techniques. In this sense, Morosi argues that Jonson derives from individual Aristophanic plays a general idea of how Aristophanic drama works, and it is “that model, and not specific *loci*, that Jonson remembers and reframes” as both “a playwright and an interpreter” (256).

These two essays tackle the reception of Greek authors through the adaptation of Herodotus’ *Histories* and Greek and Roman comedic models for the contemporary stage. No resistance emerges in these cases, but what we find are strategies of appropriation concerning plots, ideologemes, and dramatic patterns and formats.

In the following chapter on “Questions of Mediation of the *Deus ex Machina* in Elizabethan Drama”, Emanuel Stelzer poses a related and at the same time different issue: the scarce use of a theatrical device such as the *deus ex machina* which was key to Greek and Roman drama. The stagecraft and technology available at the time do not account for the paucity of examples and Stelzer raises intriguing questions of cultural resistance in the way the representation of pagan gods on stage could prompt reflection on the Catholicism with which that device was connected by the contemporary Reformed culture through memories of Medieval miracle plays. The Reformed context privileged a notion of divinity prefigured and concealed in the mysterious notion of the *deus absconditus*, which is the opposite of the *deus ex machina*. Stelzer’s discussion prompts questions on the extent to which a Protestant bias might have affected a specific dramaturgical choice that could have had a clearly metatheatrical implication. While Puritan biases concern theatre as a whole going far beyond the representation of the pagan god, the *deus ex machina* possibly remained a very hot issue within a context where resistance to theatrical culture was voiced from different quarters. Representing the pagan god could reinforce the fictitious dimension of the play but it could also imply an ideological risk that called for resistance.



## Theatregrams

As Tom Harrison reminds us, a famous saying by Ben Jonson was that the ancients should act as “guides, not commanders” (*Discoveries*, 1.98). This claim beautifully encapsulates the dialectic between the power of authorities and their epigones’ dependence on as well as freedom from them – in brief, an early modern version of Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence (1973). Ben Jonson handled it as a combination of *imitatio* and *contaminatio* creatively reshuffling different ‘guides’. The phrase “family resemblance” that Harrison uses to interpret this kind of practice identifies, in Wittgenstein’s terms, “simultaneously rigid and malleable” properties that Harrison finds in the category of theatregrams as models featuring similarities at different levels, overall or of detail. Jonson’s “contaminative dramaturgy” (296), in Harrison’s words (2023), is here explored through his articulation of choral groupings bearing a family resemblance to the use of the chorus in Aristophanes’ Old Comedy. The Collegiate ladies of *Epicene* (1609-1610) are set against the choruses of Jonson’s tragedies in a more Senecan vein and presented as an informal collective retaining the “hurting” and parabolic function of the Aristophanic chorus within a dramatic context appropriate to early modern comedy. As Harrison rightly points out, Jonson wrote for an audience which did not fully understand the ancient chorus and read it through the dramatic tradition of Seneca and Horace; and yet they could sense the performative potential of their collective licentious, aggressive, and comic incarnation. The identification of discrete theatregrams provides the grammar of what is sometimes called an Aristophanic essence or spirit, allowing for a clearer perception of its dramatic articulation and possibilities for cultural contamination.

Domenico Lovascio also uses the language of theatregrams but to identify conversations between Fletcher and Shakespeare’s affordances to access reservoirs of Greek stories or clusters of dramatic patterns. In “Unveiling Wives: Euripides’ *Alcestis* and Two Plays in the Fletcher Canon”, Lovascio concentrates on the defamiliarising effect of the trope of the veiled woman in John Fletcher’s *The Tragedy of Thierry and Theodoret* (1613-1621, probably 1617), composed in collaboration with Philip Massinger and Nathan

Field. Anyone acquainted with *The Winter's Tale* finale and its indebtedness to Euripides' *Alcestis* – or possibly George Pettie's novella version of that story in his *Petite Palace* of 1576 – would have expected a tragicomic ending, also ambiguously enhanced by Shakespeare. Lovascio brings Fletcher and Shakespeare into conversation across *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, invoking memories of ancient brotherly enmity, from Lucan to Statius (but also as filtrated through the contemporary English *Jocasta*), demonstrating the likewise contaminative dramaturgy of Fletcher in “a conscious effort systematically to defy the expectations of the audience in terms of genre and theatrical conventions” (351). If Harrison refers the theatregram device to its commedia dell'arte origin, where he unroots an articulated grammar of family resemblances, Lovascio treats the same concept more loosely, alternatively as a trope, a pattern, a theme, a motif, more strongly conversant with the contemporaries than with the ancients, resisting their guidance and inhibiting “the transition of tragedy into tragicomedie” (354).

### Generic Inflections

Lovascio's discussion brings us smoothly into the realm of generic construction. The following two chapters by Tom Bishop (“Tragedy, Persuasion, and the Humanist Daughter: Jane Lumley's *Iphigeneya*”) and Gherardo Ugolini (“Unwritten Laws and Natural Law in Watson's *Antigone*”) deal, respectively, with the first and only English and Latin translations of a Greek tragedy in the sixteenth century. Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard suggested that translations of Greek tragedies contributed to giving a sense of “English writers' increasing interest in translating Greek tragedy” and that this “developed hand-in-hand with attention to these plays' theatrical possibilities” (2017, 3). Tom Bishop looks at Lumley's translation from an opposite angle: instead of defending her dramaturgy – often charged with inaccuracy and lack of sophistication – he argues that “dramaturgy is precisely *not* what she is interested in” (373). In Bishop's reading, Lumley's prose translation, clean of metres and choruses, is placed squarely within

the legacy of rhetorical dialogue, rather than tragedy. It is close to Erasmus' colloquies and Isocrates' orations, Bishop contends, and, therefore, is concerned more with *peithō* or persuasion, than with pathos. Thus, if sixteenth-century uses of the word "tragedy" covered different genres such as narratives, plays, and a variety of Christian writings, Bishop demonstrates that this Euripidean tragedy could well be shaped by Lumley as a series of conversations focused on the topic of counsel. If Euripides' *Iphigenia* thus becomes a testing ground for dialogue and argumentation, in Watson's 1581 Latin version of Sophocles' *Antigone* is turned into a Christian tragedy in the Wittenberg tradition of readings of Sophocles. Interestingly, it presents even more strange contaminations also at the level of dramatic choices recalling parabolic devices entirely absent from the ancient tragic tradition. Gherardo Ugolini shows how the superimposition of an interpretation of the notion of unwritten laws as natural laws, absent from the original onto the play's conceptual frame, drastically changes its genre to embrace Christian theology in a similar vein to Robert Garnier's contemporary French reinvention of *Antigone ou la Pieté* (1580).

Interestingly, while Lumley dealt with dialogue and argument and Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh contaminated their version of Euripides' *Phoenissae* with dumb shows, Watson modified the genre in an early modern spirit by adding paratexts (the so-called *Pomps* and the *themes*, or short choral odes) and an *Argument* that has "the flavour of a *parabasis* (unthinkable in an ancient Greek tragedy), a text with a programmatic message offering the reader/viewer, even before the drama begins, not only an essential presentation and/or recapitulation of the events, but also, and especially, a key for their interpretation in the light of the role of nature and the violation of her rules" (396). It is precisely a message on the role of Nature and natural laws that is contained in this liminal text providing the right instructions to read Sophocles' Greek tragedy through a Christian filter.

How a rediscovery of Attic tragedy in France mediated by François de Belleforest's narrative rewriting of Matteo Bandello's "Timbreo e Fenicia" possibly oriented Shakespeare's reflection on how a tragic story could become tragicomic is the subject of Tania Demetriou's following chapter ("Much Ado about Greek

Tragedy? Shakespeare, Euripides, and the *histoire tragique*”). In accord with Colin Burrow’s contention that Shakespeare’s drama is embedded in the narrative culture of contemporary European novellas, Demetriou demonstrates that the tragic genre in the novella tradition interacted with the reception of Greek tragedy in ways that suggest an interplay with the Euripidean device of the veiled bride in *Alceste*. Shakespeare’s encounter with Belleforest’s version of the Bandello tale also implied a closer encounter with the Stobaeian Euripides contained in that French novella, suggesting to him generic possibilities for *Much Ado about Nothing* that he would later further develop in *The Winter’s Tale*. In this sense, Demetriou unveils complex layers of generic interplay, from Attic tragedy to contemporary reflections on what tragic meant in the context of French narratives and how they could swerve towards comic endings. This journey through different traditions reveals the complex mediations of a concurrent cultural blend of factors that went beyond the either/or alternative in the identification of sources, with regard not only to a text, but also to the articulation of a genre.

While Demetriou approaches the format of tragicomedy reaching back to Greek tragedy through the Italian and French novellas, Janice Valls-Russell starts from Greek historiography – Herodotus, Xenophon and Plutarch – to approach English tragedy *à la française*, mediated by the Senecan model. In “Translating Greek History into Humanist Neo-Senecan Drama: William Alexander’s *Croesus* (1604)”, Valls-Russell takes up the example of Alexander’s Persian play also discussed by Dall’Olio for its political adjustments to contemporary concerns to examine the polygenetic weave of a historical drama in a “classical” fashion. Long narratives can hardly be contained within the space of a regular tragedy in Senecan style. But from those ancient historians Alexander learned how to embed individual stories within larger histories as “inset narratives which mirror features of the main dramatic action” (453). This chapter explores the hybridisation of Greek narrative with a Senecan format, the use of native verse and separate choruses for commentary, individual models derived from ancient Greek and Roman drama and epic, rounded off with heightened pathos in the French style. Such a medley of styles and registers raises questions on the idea

itself of tragedy as a genre which at this stage in the cultural context of English drama could encompass “austere tragicomedy” (461) as well. It also testifies to the “resilience with which narratives from a distant elsewhere reinvent and actualise themselves” (465).

## Pastiche

Fragments are inherent in the reception and perception of Greek and Roman texts. They were read as series of parts, they were scattered as quotations and *sententiae* in other texts, they bore portions of a distant culture that was being received as refracted through sparse testimonies, commentaries, editions, translations, elaborate mediations as well as performances of excerpts.<sup>9</sup> But there is one case that is especially representative of how fragmentation and recomposition concurred to constructing the assumedly whole picture of a play epitomatic of the Christianisation of ancient tragedy: *Christus Patiens*. In his seminal study of 1988, Bruce Smith aptly replaced the notion of influence with that of confluence, suggesting that the intersection between Greek and Roman culture with the early moderns could profitably be seen from the perspective of the latter. His premise is worth recollecting at length:

Since the Renaissance itself, critics have been pointing out the marks that ancient drama has left on modern; this book looks at the matter from the opposite direction as well and considers the marks that modern drama has left on ancient, particularly on the first stage productions of Greek and Latin scripts in modern times. In these physical confrontations between classical heroes and modern Englishmen, we can observe how each party had to accommodate itself to the other, how the protagonists of Greek and Roman drama were compelled to fit in with the staging traditions and moral assumptions of the Middle Ages, and how, at the same time, modern audiences were challenged to revise their customary ways of looking at plays and to explore two new structures of thought and feeling – “comic” and “tragic” – until those two categories

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Burrow 2013, 164ff. for comments on the same practice about Senecan tragedy.

reestablished their dominion over the entire dramatic universe in Restoration neoclassicism. (6-7)

Building on this premise, in “‘Is All Well Put Together In Every Part?’: Assembling a Renaissance *Bacchae*”, William N. West examines the famous Byzantine cento of lines from Greek tragedies on Christ’s Passion, a text that eventually supplemented a few missing passages from Euripides’ *Bacchae* to fill the famous gap where Agave realises the horror of Pentheus’ dismemberment. Although *Bacchae* was “practically unknown” to the Elizabethans (Orgel 2021b, 64), *Christus Patiens* was not, and it incorporated in its final part what were later recognised to be two lacunae in the final scene of Euripides’ play as transmitted by the Byzantine manuscript and the Renaissance editions. *Christus Patiens*, a tragedy on the suffering of Christ, is a patchwork of co-texts making for a whole, in fact assembling bits and pieces from different originally non-conversant Greek texts. Once those lines taken from a version of *Bacchae* we do not have are restored into modern editions of that play, they occlude their absence in the editions the early moderns could access. William West brings the example of this Renaissance pastiche as a literal, material instance of the confluence Smith talks about, and finally as a supreme example of the kind of problems this book engages with: a “conflation and flowing together”, the “emblematic Greek tragedy for the Renaissance reception of antiquity, repeatedly appropriating and recontextualising favoured elements so that they acquire new resonances and new relations, and then carrying these with them as shadowy connotations as they are set into yet other contexts” (474).

Such a piecemeal way of composing a whole tells us something about the reception and appropriation of Greek antiquity for Christian purposes. It also tells us how from readings that atomised ancient texts new Renaissance visions accommodating contemporary stances could take shape. Whether these co-texts within one and the same play, as in this case, or layers of inter-texts co-present in the memory and ideational space of early modern readers as well as of readers of readers over time could be called sources in a traditional sense, is what this book challenges. Its attempt is to make sense of the haunting presence of an invisible antiquity.

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