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Dramatizing the classics: a stage-way to Classical Reception.

Throughout centuries, after the revival of the interest for the ancient Greek classic literature, the representation of classic texts has been used in European colleges and universities as a means of teaching the ancient Greek and Latin drama (Puchner, 1997:25). Teachers found that having their students role-playing the texts, helped them learn the language and understand better the ideas and the spirit of the classics.

Ancient Greek tragedy texts have already been in the centre of interest of the classical studies since the 16th century, thus they were integrated in the Humanity Studies. In England, access to these studies was given not only to nobility but also to people from a wider social status range. Performances of ancient drama of Seneca, Euripides, Sophocles, Plautus and Terence were given in universities and colleges. A short list of performances of euripidean plays in England during the 16th century¹ conveys the frequency of the phenomenon: *Hippolytus* (1552-1553), school performance in University of Cambridge (King's College), which could be based on the homonymous play of Euripides or on Seneca's *Phaedra, Horestes* (possibly played between 1550 and 1567), "a play drawing on medieval versions of the Orestes story", in English language, played in London, *Hecuba* (1559) in University of Cambridge (Trinity College), *Orestes* (1567), an adaptation in Latin of Euripides' *Orestes*, school performance in Westminster School of London given in front of the Queen Elisabeth I, *Iphigenia* (1575-1582), school performance of Euripides' *Iphigenia en Aulis* at St Paul's School of London, played in English language, directed by Sebastian Westcott.

In Germany, several Catholic or Protestant schools used to give ancient tragedy performances mostly in Latin, either for instructive purposes or in order to train the students in speaking and proper behavior (eds. Brocket-Hildy, *History of the Theatre* 2003: 267).

¹ A product of research conducted for the needs of my PhD study for the reception of Euripides in Europe, in order to find common fields of this process with the euripidean reception in Greece.

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After two centuries of cessation due to political, religious and social reasons, this practice is found again escalating in English universities throughout the nineteenth century. Ancient drama was connected with the increasingly intense interest in Greek Antiquity which was aided by new, emerging studies of special sciences about it, including Literature, History, and Archaeology. Theatre performances were again used as a tutorial means in approaching ancient drama, following the idea that this way students can apprehend better the scholia accompanying the plays (Macintosh 2015:300). Richard Valpy, Headmaster and ancient Greek literature teacher in Reading Grammar School is considered to be one of the first teachers who organized and directed ancient Greek tragedy performances, open to the public, starting in 1809, with the staging of Euripides' *Alcestis* (Niall W. Slater, 2013:82). Performances were given for the benefit of local charities (W. H. G. Armytage, 1970:86). Valpy's contribution in staging ancient drama, for almost twenty years, is considered important.

During the last two decades of the 19th century, ancient drama performances in universities became established events, thus drawing the attention of the acclaimed scholars of the time. After the success of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in Oxford in 1880 (Hall-Macintosh, 2005:453) the performances became social events; they were contributed by theatre professionals and frequented by the social elite of the time, who arrived in Oxford University in numbers; for Sophocles' *Ajax* performance in 1882, for example, special trains were laid from King's Cross Station in London. At the same time, the prestige of the universities was amplified with the participation in the performances of first class athletes, students of the universities (Walton, 2007:477). Bradfield College and Cambridge University both established Greek Play Festivals, commencing in 1882, with numerous performances. In Bradfield College an open theatre was built in 1890, having Epidaurus amphitheatre as a model.

Staging ancient Greek drama became popular in universities and colleges on the other side of the Atlantic almost instantly. Performances were given a status of a great importance and they were frequently followed by the publication of the play presented (for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was performed in 1881 by the Greek Department of the Harvard University and published at the same year).

Oxford performances were being staged with the aid of professionals; the productions

were being well noticed, with original music scores and special care for scenery and costumes (Hardwick, 2003:59). The wish for historical accuracy in depicting scenery and costumes, gave the initiative for a more comprehensive effort in this factor (Hardwick, 2003:60). Heinrich Schliemann's archaeological discoveries in Greece, that came to light in 1870's, were published with photographs and drawings in English newspapers (Hall-Macintosh, 2005:449), inspiring even more the interest for ancient Greek antiquity and offering ideas for a well-documented set to the scenery designers. University ancient drama performances had a great impact to the public, and became a big asset to the reception of ancient Greek drama and its eventual upcoming presence in the repertoire of professional troupes.

It should be mentioned that, in some occasions, student ancient drama staging assisted in claiming social rights; for instance the participation of female students of Queen's College in the performance of *Alceste* in 1886 in London, was connected with the women's claim for their right to be educated (Hall-Macintosh, 2005:457). As already mentioned above, the performances had also an impact in publishing activity: the plays were published right after the performances. For instance, *Ion* of Euripides as performed at Cambridge, Nov.25-29, 1890, with a translation in prose by M.A. Bayfield, was printed at the same year of the performance.

English paradigm in staging ancient drama in schools during the 19th century is not the only case in Europe. A great activity by the Phanariot Greeks who lived in principalities along the Danube is also noted. Theatrical performances as part of extracurricular activities in schools were organized at the Hellenic Gymnasium of Iasi already since 1803 (Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, 2007:268). Performances were also organized as part of the artistic and literary interest of Greek intellectuals in the Greek communities of Wallachia and Moldavia at the court of Alexandros Mourouzis in Iasi in 1805 and by Rallou Karatza at the court of her father Ioannis Karatzas in Bucharest in 1816 (Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, 2007:268). Though the motive in these cases was not particularly educational, it is still a clear example of how the appreciation of ancient Greek drama initially highlighted by the educational community, lead to an apprehension by the authorities, in order to broaden its limits of performance. In Bucharest, this effort was particularly supported by Rallou Karatza, who formed a Greek troupe of amateurs from the pupils

who took part in school performances, in order to establish Greek speaking theatre in Bucharest. Similar theatre activity is also found in Constantinople, where Greek teachers, inspired by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, encouraged their students to organize ancient Greek drama performances, as a means of reinforcing the configuration of the neohellenic 'public theatre' (Constantinos Economos, 1871: λε').

Neofytos Doukas, a famous Greek scholar of that time and one of the first Greek translators of ancient Greek drama in the Modern Greek Language in the first decades of the 19th century, states a very interesting point in his preface in Sophocles' edition of tragedies (1834). He encourages teachers to inspire their students to represent the Greek drama, using his translations. He manifests that it is important not to give emphases in the costumes or the scenery, but to the poetry itself; by acting, the students will be able to understand the texts better (Doukas 1834, vol A': γ'-δ'). The idea resembles the pedagogic theory of "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1916), proving Doukas to be a pioneer as to the purposes of his translating activity.

Throughout 19th century, around the territory of the newly founded state of Greece, there were numerous efforts of performing ancient drama in schools. Apart from the emerging dispute over performing ancient drama in translation or in the ancient Greek language, which had a serious impact in the history of the ancient drama's revival in Greece, it appears that school performances, apart from providing a better understanding of the context, assisted in connecting ancient drama with theatre practice.

During the 20th century and up to our times, the process of staging ancient Greek drama in schools has evolved, with the establishment of festivals and contests, presenting exemplary amateur performances and combining the literal educational purposes with the ones of exploring the theatrical function of ancient Greek *amphitheatres*. A current example is given by the "Ancient Messene Festival", held in the Ancient Theatre of Messene, Peloponnese, where, for the last six years, troupes of students present ancient Greek or Latin drama. The festival is well-attended, has no competitive nature and has established a spirit of exchanging ideas and experiences between the young students/amateur troupes.

During the last decades of the 20th century, with the increased number of ‘revivals’, ‘adaptations’, etc., of the ancient Greek drama occurring in most countries, along with the related scholarly studies, a number of questions have been raised about the connection of Classics with Theatre Studies in the context of what we call Classical Reception. The interaction of these sciences was originally argued in a prolific way by Professor Oliver Taplin of Oxford University (Diamantakou, 2007: 31-32). Taplin’s representing approach of classic drama is considered to be the beginning of a new exchange between Classic Literature and Theatre Studies, which builds a new way of understanding drama as a combination of the poetry and the theatre action at the same time (Taplin 1985). Four years ago, in a lecture called «From Page to Stage: an Exchange between Classics and Theatre Studies» (Athens, 12 March 2013), Professors Taplin and Mavromoustakos argued, among other issues, the enrichment of methods used in approaching ancient Greek literature provided by Theatre Studies and the reinforcement of analytic tools given to Theatre Studies from the Classics. After Taplin’s introduction of the idea of merging the tools of each science in order to approach ancient Greek drama, the effort of theoretically describing Classical Reception has been a serious task for a number of scholars (Hardwick, 2003). At the same time, ancient Greek drama has been used most frequently as a means of teaching, interpreting and understanding both the ancient and the modern world’s politics and culture (Lauriola, 2014:39-42).

A unique application of this process is found in the project “Thucydides Dramaticus: The Theater of War”, held by Herc in Greece in 2016. Dramatizing the texts of Thukydidēs, by students of both Classics and Drama schools, as explained by Head Instructor John Lignadis, has not only “contributed in the experiential approach of the timeless and global phenomenon of ‘war’ through both the comprehension of the schemes that produce military violence and the emotional excitement provoked by its disastrous outcome” (Lignadis, 2016: 11), but also achieved to thrive on stage.

In 21st century, Greek Antiquity remains a huge cultural capital, which brings Humanity Sciences even closer to each other in order to form new paths in Classical Reception. Dramatizing the classics has been proved extremely effective; as this brief overview has tried to argue, the stage-way to classics offers to scholars, students and the public a

better understanding not only of the classical texts and their contexts, but of the world in general.

Website resources*:

The official page of Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama:

<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>.

The official page of Bradfield College Festival:

<http://www.bradfieldcollege.org.uk/college-history>.

The official website for Cambridge Greek Play:

<http://www.cambridgegreekplay.com/the-history-of-the-cambridge-greek-play>.

The official website for Ancient Messene Festival:

<http://ancientmessenefestival.blogspot.gr>.

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<http://www.blod.gr/lectures/Pages/viewlecture.aspx?LectureID=745>.

The “Thucydides Dramaticus” project official website:

<http://www.herc.gr/thucydides.php>.

*accessed November 2016.

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