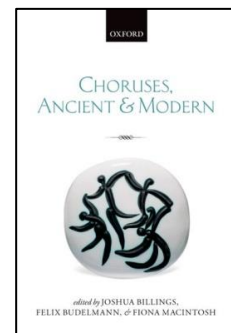


Seneca, theatercombinat, and embodied philology

When Claudia Bosse asks classical scholars to collaborate with her, they usually respond well: Georg Danek (Universität Wien) participated to the *Massakermykene* project (1999-2000), Edith Hall (King's College London), Sophie Klimis (Université Saint-Louis) and Georg Danek were involved in *Persians* (2006-2008), Sophie Klimis also collaborated within *Phèdre* (2008), and Edith Hall has recently commented on *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* in a live talk and in her blog (<http://edithorial.blogspot.com/2019/10/when-karl-met-lucius-annaeus-seneca.html>).

I can think of different reasons why classical philologists, myself included, may be particularly interested in Claudia Bosse's work on ancient drama, and they go beyond the close attention which she pays to the language and even textual dimension of theatre. A fairly general reason is that reception has become hugely important to classical scholarship (and will grow even more important in the future); this, and the plain fact that re-performances of ancient drama play a major role in modern and contemporary Western theatre (especially in German-speaking areas: see E. Fischer-Lichte, *Tragedy's Endurance*, OUP 2017) naturally draws classicists closer to stage artists who deal with Greek and Roman drama. A more particular reason which I am going to discuss is that the body-focused and carefully choreographed dramaturgy of Claudia Bosse resonates well with some present-day research trends in Classics. *Persians*, for instance, was quick to find its way into discussions about ancient choruses and their modern revivals in a volume edited by classicists (<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199670574.001.0001/acprof-9780199670574-chapter-20>). Along the same lines, what follows shall argue that *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* is congenial to today's re-appraisal of Seneca's tragedies as likely sources of inspiration for ancient dance and to practice-based approaches to Latin poems which, like Seneca's, are imbued with kinaesthetic imagery.



For a decade now, experts such as Helen Slaney, Alessandra Zanobi and Bernhard Zimmermann have been arguing that Seneca's tragedies (like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) were probably re-worked and re-used as libretti for pantomime, a dance genre which gained huge popularity in the Imperial period and in which one masked actor-dancer danced stories from the mythical and tragic repertoire, playing all the characters himself. While the rich kinesthetic, bodily and sensory vocabulary of Seneca's text substantially corroborates this view, observing how Seneca's *Thyestes* has sparked Claudia Bosse's choreographic thinking and how it reverberates through the body and gestural language of *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* can enrich this scholarly notion with further practice-based insights.

Thyestes Brüder! Kapital is committed to exploring possible relationships between body and text and to experimenting with ways to embody the text. The stage rendering of Thyestes' cannibal meal, to which I will return later, may strike us as the most radical of these text embodiments, but is by no means an isolated case. For example, when the Fury coerces the ghost of Tantalus to bring ruin upon his own progeny, what in Seneca reads like the Fury's animal excitement at her own schemes and the powerless, disgusted surrender of Tantalus (*Thyestes* 1-121) is rendered through the Fury's (Rotraud Kern) eager rubbing and moving upon Tantalus (Lilly Prohaska), who is prostrated on his hands and knees and thus sexually exposed; tellingly, by the end of their duet the body friction has caused the neon-yellow body paint of the Fury and the ghostly white of Tantalus to mix and smear on each other's bodies as a lasting visual reminder that Tantalus' complicity has been extorted. The circumstance that the five actors also double as chorus members only multiplies their occasions for reflecting and counterpointing the text by means of formations, bearings and movements.

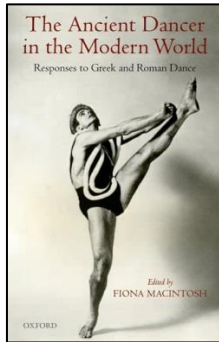


Yellow marks of this violence remains visible on Tantalus' white body →
(Photographs: Elsa Okazaki for theatercombinat)

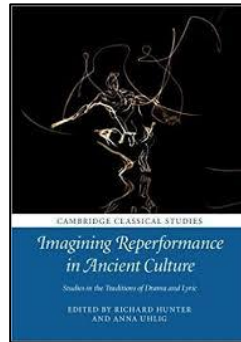
← The Fury (Rotraud Kern) forces Tantalus (Lilly Prohaska) into obedience



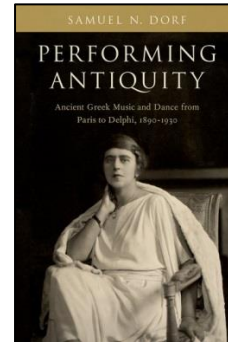
Coming to the reenacting approaches to ancient texts, the research which, superseding the 1990s HIPs (historically informed performances), is being carried out in the broad field of performance studies is currently inspiring classical scholars not only to investigate ancient theories and practices of re-performance, but also, with the help of performing artists, to tackle ancient texts which were composed or re-used for performance by means of practice-based research.



OUP 2012



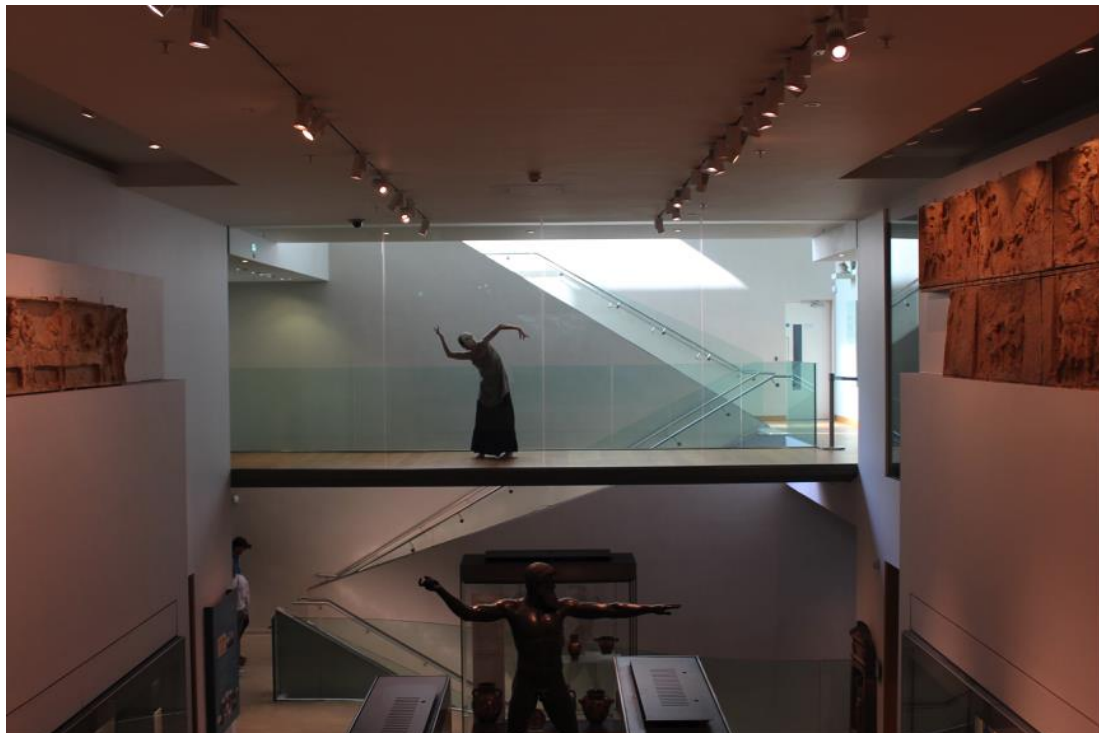
CUP 2017



OUP 2018

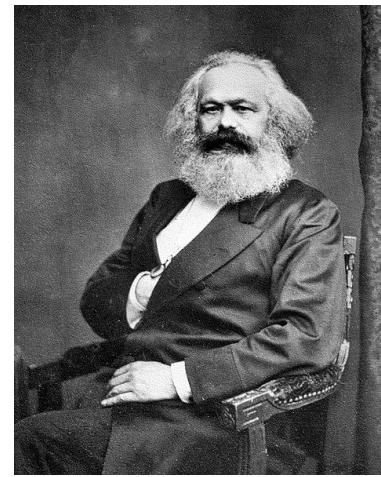
Recent samples of classical scholarship on theories and practices of re-performance

Finally awoken from the dream (especially dear to 20th century French scholars of ancient dance) that past performances can be faithfully reconstructed on the basis of textual and archaeological documents, today's re-enactments draw inspiration from the surviving evidence of the past to create new performances which are not shy in sending non-ancient messages of, say, social and political interest. Marie-Louise Crawley, for example, in cooperation with the Oxford-based APGRD/Archive for Performance of Greek and Roman Drama (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>), has recently created and performed the durational dance work *Likely Terpsichore? (Fragments)* which, while inspired by ancient sources on Roman pantomime and by the kinaesthetic language of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, also re-narrates the story of four female mythical characters from a woman's perspective – and through a woman's body.



Marie-Louise Crawley dances *Likely Terpsichore? (Fragments)* at the Ashmolean Museum
(Photograph: Marchella Ward, source: <https://apgrdblog.com/2018/12/04/likely-terpsichore-fragments/>)

In many regards, *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* can be understood as re-enacting Seneca. One might think of the juxtaposition of the cannibal meal of Thyestes and of the passage from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* which lays bare the complementarity of goods production and consumption, and their power to call into existence producers who also are consumers. On the one hand Marx's words, recited by Juri Zanger from the top of a ladder and pouring down like a hail of bullets, rationalize the tragedy of Thyestes eating his own children in terms of producers turning into consumers; on the other hand, the ingesting and burping performance of Thyestes (Nic Lloyd), who gorges on some very red and splashy foods in a factory kitchen, literally gives body to the most visceral implications of Marx's concepts. Paradoxically, this intertextual relationship becomes even more emphatic once the words are over and Juri Zanger sits speechless next to Nic Lloyd.



Counterpoints: Thyestes (Nic Lloyd) eats his own children while Karl Marx reasons about the circularity of production and consumption (left photograph: Eva Würdinger for theatercombinat)

For obvious reasons, *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* can elicit peculiar responses from spectators who are acquainted with Seneca's *Thyestes* and encourage them to rethink the bodily, sensory and kinaesthetic aspects of the text. To mention just one example from my own experience, when the messenger (Alexandra Sommerfeld) recounted how Atreus killed and roasted his nephews to serve them to Thyestes, seeing how her body continued shaking in terror for minutes made me wonder about ancient performances and re-performances of Seneca's messenger, who on the one hand says that his limbs are rigid with fear (so much so that he can hardly speak), on the other describes each action, gesture and movement of Atreus with painful accuracy and with engrossing slow-motion effects. Also, listening to how the messenger pronounced the word Atreus in deep guttural sounds, betraying an impulse to vomit, effectively tied in my acoustic imagery the notion of Atreus to that of some unspeakable organic matter which is equally hard to digest for producers, consumers and spectators.

October 19th, 2019