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*Dining and re-dining with Thyestes.
Embodying Seneca's tragedy in antiquity and today**

Abstract

Stage director and choreographer Claudia Bosse and the Vienna-based theatre group theatercombinat have once again re-interpreted an ancient tragedy in thought-provoking fashion. *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital. Anatomie einer Rache* draws inspiration from Seneca's *Thyestes* to experiment with the relationships between actors and chorus, performers and spectators, space and body, text and performance. The play premiered in Düsseldorf (September 11th to 14th, 2019) and was then performed in Vienna (October 2nd to 17th).

La regista-coreografa Claudia Bosse e la compagnia teatrale viennese theatercombinat hanno offerto, ancora una volta, una rielaborazione provocatoria di un dramma antico. *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital. Anatomie einer Rache* si ispira al *Tieste* di Seneca per sondare le relazioni tra attori e coro, tra interpreti e spettatori, tra spazio e corpo e tra testo e performance. Dopo la prima a Düsseldorf (11-14 Settembre 2019) l'opera è stata presentata anche a Vienna (2-17 Ottobre).

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 with the artists and spectators (*Marx and Classical Cannibalism*, Vienna, October 4th 2019) 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.g. Fischer-

* Many thanks to Claudia Bosse, Michael Franz Woels and theatercombinat for involving me in the exciting project *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital. Anatomie einer Rache*. The present contribution expands on the themes which I have discussed for the theatercombinat webpage (http://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/thyestes/images/seneca_%20theatercombinat_embodiedphilology_laura_gianvittorio_unger_20191023.pdf).

Lichte 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. Her *Persians*, for instance, was quick to find its way into discussions about ancient theatre, ancient choruses and their modern revivals in volumes edited by or with classicists (see Bosse 2009, Danek 2009, Fischer-Lichte 2013 and Bosse – Haitzinger 2016¹). Along these 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 Bernhard Zimmermann (2008), Helen Slaney (2013) and Alessandra Zanobi (2014) have been arguing that Seneca's tragedies –like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other poems of the same period– 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 (Garelli 2007; Lada-Richards 2007; Webb 2008; Hall – Wyles 2008; Schlapbach 2018). This comparatively recent view defies the traditional one that Seneca's tragedies were recitation-dramas and is substantially corroborated by the rich kinesthetic, bodily and sensory vocabulary of these texts. Indeed, since the late twentieth century, the stage reception of Seneca's tragedies has been fascinated by the «hyperreality, conspicuous consumption and spectacular violence» of these texts and by the possibilities they disclose and prompt for stage renderings². Today, observing how Seneca's plays continue to spark choreographic thinking and the physical and gestural vocabularies of theatre and performance artists can enrich the scholarly notion that these plays were probably danced in antiquity with further practice-based insights – not (of course) to reconstruct lost ancient performances but to appreciate how performable Seneca's texts are. In this regard, *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital* is in good company: to mention just another recent example relating to Seneca's *Thyestes*, one might think of *Cicatrici*, a piece staged by the Italian theatre group Kronoteatro in 2018 which (according to a discussion published in the previous issue of *Dionysus ex machina*) not only focused on bodily aspects but also displayed choreographic sensitivity and a number of scenes reminiscent of dance theatre³.

¹ The volume in which BOSSE – HAITZINGER (2016) was published is part of a book series edited by B. Zimmermann and also contains a chapter on the ancient chorus written by him.

² Slaney <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/learning/short-guides/reception-of-senecan-tragedy>.

³ BONANDINI (2018, 118).

Archaic blow (*archaische Wucht*) is a phrase which has recurred more than once in press reviews of *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital* – with good reason⁴. Like other theatrical and choreographic works by Claudia Bosse, *Thyestes, Brüder! Kapital* also experiments with new forms of chorality and is conceived as an immersive/participative performance. The choral experiments all revisit traditional relationships between chorus and actors: the five actors who play Tantalus' ghost, the Fury, Thyestes, Atreus and the messenger also double as chorus members (**Fig. 1**); in this latter capacity, they constantly seek bodily engagement with the text, and this engagement is emphasized by their being naked, by the use of body paint and by the alienating slowness of their movements. Moreover, at the pivotal moment when Thyestes is about to consume the cannibal meal of his own children, a further and larger chorus of children begins buzzing around the performance space and joins the actor-choreuts in what vaguely resembles a mass-choral recitative (mass-choral recitatives have had a special tradition in German-language re-workings of ancient drama since the *Sprechchöre* of Wilhelm Leyhausen). As to the immersive/participative performance, the audience is encouraged to explore, walk through and hence modify the performance space, thus constantly re-defining it. In Vienna, the performance space was a disused factory kitchen and canteen on the outskirts of Vienna (the tenth district has been home to the Viennese working class for many generations now) – a space which of course enriched the intertextual assonances which Bosse created between Seneca's parental cannibalism and Marx' cycle of production and consumption (see below). By walking through and casually sitting around the performance space, the spectators ended up intermingling with the choral performers and obviously interfering with their formations, movements and actions⁵.

⁴ See the critics by M. Preiner (<https://www.european-cultural-news.com/thyestes-brueder-kapital/34740/>) and by M. Pesl (https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20191009/der-kannibale-und-das-kapital-in-der-kantine/_b21240412a).

⁵ I quote here from the text which presented *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital* to the press: «die entfernung zur sprache und den motiven von seneca wird über die unbedingte nähe der zuschauer*innen zu den akteur*innen unterbrochen. die auffaltung der handlung in verschiedene choreografische konstellationen im raum, durch die sich die zuschauer*innen frei hindurch bewegen können, markiert das spannungsgefüge zur gegenwart» (<http://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/thyestes/images/THYpressedossier20190903.pdf>, p. 8).



Fig. 1. The five actors doubling as chorus members (Photograph: Robin Junicke)

Thyestes Brüder! Kapital is particularly committed to exploring possible relationships between body and text and to experimenting with synesthetic ways to embody the text⁶. 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. 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 (**Fig. 2** and **3**); 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 (**Fig. 4**).

⁶ The text used is the German translation by Durs Grünbein.



Fig. 2 and 3. The Fury (Rotraud Kern) forces Tantalus (Lilly Prohaska) into obedience (Photographs: Photograph: Robin Junicke and Elsa Okazaki)



Fig. 4. Yellow marks of this violence remain visible on Tantalus' white body (Photograph: Elsa Okazaki for theatercombinat)

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 to investigate ancient theories and practices of re-performance (e.g. Hunter – Uhling 2017; Spelman 2018), to reconsider practice-based approaches to classical antiquity as

research approaches which complement the *Altertumswissenschaften* (e.g. Dorf 2018; Slaney 2019) and also, with the help of performing artists, to tackle ancient texts which were composed or re-used for performance by means of performance-based research. 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 link together archive and repertoire and draw inspiration from the surviving evidence of the past to create new performances⁷. Accordingly, reenactments of Greek and Roman dance try and derive knowledge from kinaesthetic engagement with literary and archaeological documents and are not shy in sending non-ancient messages of, say, social and political interest. To mention just two examples, both related to the *APGRD/Archive for Performance of Greek and Roman Drama* (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>), the Oxford-based project *Ancient Dance in Modern Dancers* seeks to make new sense of ancient sources on dance by performing and experiencing dance works inspired by them with the help of classical scholars, professionally-trained dancers and anthropologists (**Fig. 5**, see also <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/ancient-dance-modern-dancers>), and Marie-Louise Crawley has recently created and performed at the Ashmolean Museum the durational dance solo *Likely Terpsichore? (Fragments)* which, while inspired 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 (**Fig. 6**; cf. Crawley, forthcoming).



Fig. 5. In collaboration with *Ancient Dance in Modern Dancers*, dancer Emily May created the dance solo *Deluge*, which she re-performed in the Library of Classics of the University of Vienna (my photograph)

⁷ See e.g. FRANKO (2017).

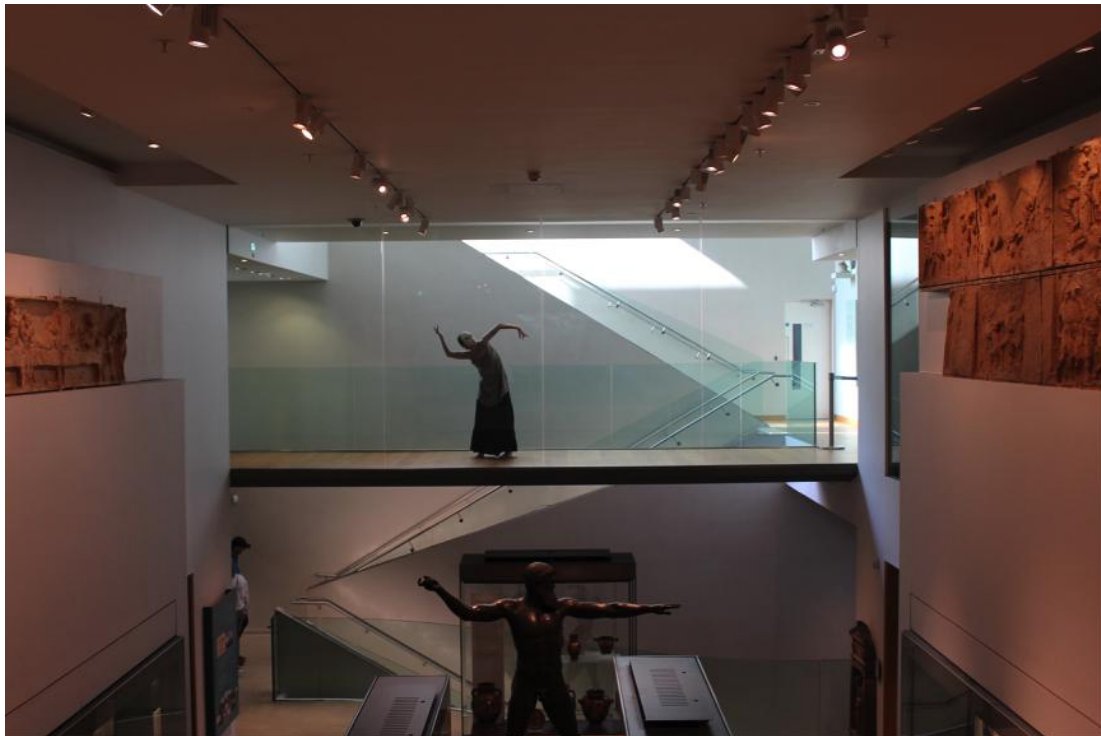


Fig. 6. Marie-Louise Crawley dances *Likely Terpsichore? (Fragments)* at the Ashmolean Museum (Photograph: Marchella Ward, source: <https://apgrdblog.com/2018/12/04/likely-terpsichore-fragments/>)

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 (**Fig. 7** and **8**). 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, literally gives body to the most visceral implications of Marx's concepts. The (organic) matter of the Pelopids and the (historical) materialism of Marx comments on each other. In this process, the two performers embody their respective texts in such a radical way that, paradoxically, intertextual relationships become even more emphatic once the words are over and Juri Zanger sits speechless next to Nic Lloyd in the brilliantly chosen space of the factory kitchen.

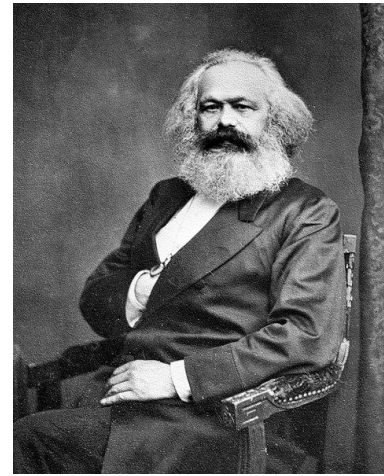
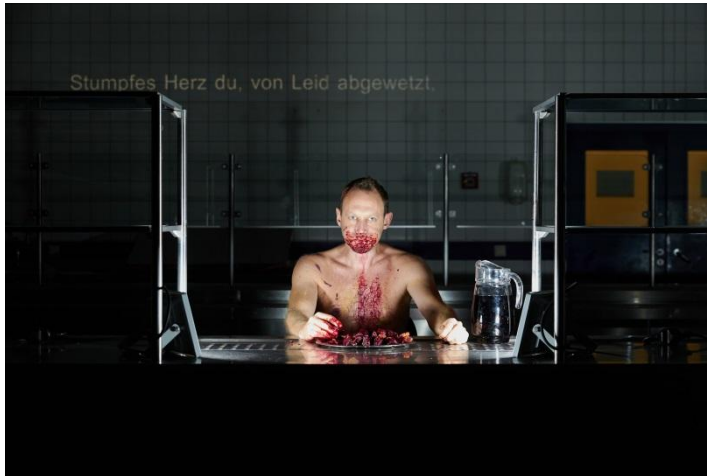


Fig. 7 and 8. Counterpoints: Thyestes (Nic Lloyd) eats his own children while Karl Marx reasons about the circularity of production and consumption (left photograph: Eva Würdinger for theatercombinat)

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 two examples 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 possible 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.

Persons involved in *Thyestes Brüder! Kapital*

Concept, space, artistic direction: Claudia Bosse

Actors: Rotraud Kern (chorus member/Fury), Mun Wai Lee (chorus member/Atreus), Nic Lloyd (chorus member/Thyestes), Lilly Prohaska (chorus member/Tantalus), Alexandra Sommerfeld (chorus member/messenger), Juri Zanger (speaker)

Chorus in Düsseldorf: Finn Cam, Nina Daumen, Sumejja Dizdarevic, Emma Fuhrmeister, Friederike Kemmether, Djordje Mandic

Chorus in Vienna: Gabriel Blasl, Sonia N. Brindus, Sumejja Dizdarevic, Emma Edwards, Magdalena Frauenberger, Valentino Gallo, Anna Grobauer, Ines Kaiser, Franz Perko, Elina Elisabeth Pratter, Josephina Radojkovic, Hannah Resatz, Victoria Simon, Jonas E. Tonnhofer, Roswitha Zeillinger. Chorus leader: Constance Cauers (Junges Volkstheater Wien)

Sound, video: Günther Auer

Technical direction: Marco Tölzer

Critical witness: Reinhold Göring

Assistant to the director: Dagmar Tröstler

Administration: Len-Henrik Busch, Ella Felber

Communication: Oliver Maus, Michael Franz Woels

Press: Barbara Pluch

Production: Alexander Matthias Kosnopfl

Performance rights: Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin

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