



THEATROCRACY

GREEK DRAMA, COGNITION, AND THE
IMPERATIVE FOR THEATRE

PETER MEINECK



Theatrocracy

Theatrocracy is a book about the power of the theatre, how it can affect the people who experience it, and the societies within which it is embedded. It takes as its model the earliest theatrical form we possess complete plays from, the classical Greek theatre of the fifth century BCE, and offers a new approach to understanding how ancient drama operated in performance and became such an influential social, cultural, and political force, inspiring and being influenced by revolutionary developments in political engagement and citizen discourse. Key performative elements of Greek theatre are analyzed from the perspective of the cognitive sciences as embodied, live, enacted events, with new approaches to narrative, space, masks, movement, music, words, emotions, and empathy. This groundbreaking study combines research from the fields of the affective sciences – the study of human emotions – including cognitive theory, neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence, psychiatry, and cognitive archaeology, with classical, theatre, and performance studies.

This book revisits what Plato found so unsettling about drama – its ability to produce a *theatrocracy*, a “government” of spectators – and argues that this was not a negative but an essential element of Athenian theatre. It shows that Athenian drama provided a place of alterity where audiences were exposed to different viewpoints and radical perspectives. This perspective was, and is, vital in a freethinking democratic society where people are expected to vote on matters of state. In order to achieve this goal, the theatre offered a dissociative and absorbing experience that enhanced emotionality, deepened understanding, and promoted empathy. There was, and still is, an urgent imperative for theatre.

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Theatrocracy

Greek Drama, Cognition, and
the Imperative for Theatre

Peter Meineck

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**For Desiree, Sofia, and Marina
always on my mind**



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Introduction

Theatre as a mimetic mind

This is a book about the power of the theatre – how it can affect the people who experience it and the societies within which it is embedded. It takes as its model the earliest theatrical form we possess complete plays from, the classical Greek theatre of the fifth century BCE, and uses a new approach to understanding how ancient drama operated in performance and became such an influential social, cultural, and political force, inspiring and being influenced by revolutionary developments in political engagement and citizen discourse. With this in mind, I approach Greek theatre from the perspective of the cognitive sciences as an embodied live-enacted event, and I analyze how certain different performative elements acted upon its audiences to create absorbing narrative action, emotional intensity, intellectual reflection, and strong feelings of empathy. This was the key to the transformative artistic and social power that enabled Greek drama to advance alternate viewpoints and display distinctly different perspectives. In Athens, theatre – an art form associated with cult practice – soon became a major part of Athenian political engagement. This led Aristotle to comment on how the collective audience displayed the best abilities of human judgment, and for Plato to bitterly complain that this theatrical empowerment was allowing for a kind of rule of the masses, what Plato called a *theatrocracy*, the title of this book.¹

I revisit what Plato found so unsettling about drama – its ability to produce a *theatrocracy*, a “government” of spectators – and argue that this was not a negative but an essential element of Athenian theatre. I hope to show that Athenian drama provided a place of alterity where audiences were exposed to different viewpoints and radical perspectives. This perspective was, and is, vital in a free-thinking democratic society where people are expected to vote on matters of state. In order to achieve this goal, the theatre offered a dissociative and absorbing experience that enhanced emotionality, deepened understanding, and promoted empathy. Paul Cartledge has described the Athenian theatre as an essential part of the learning process of the Athenian citizen “to be an active participant in self-government by mass meeting and open debate between peers.”² My aim is to explore how the theatre did this by analyzing several important experiential elements from a variety of new perspectives: narrative, environment, masks, movement, music, and lyrics.

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Plato was incensed that ordinary citizens felt that they had the right to express a political opinion, and certainly, theatre can manipulate emotions, misdirect, push certain agendas, and tacitly support particular political, religious, or cultural values. Yet, even with the advent of the spectacular mimetic attributes of film and television, which both employ many of the same performative devices we first find in Greek drama, theatre remains a part of our cultural landscape, with more than 12.9 million people visiting Broadway shows in New York City in 2015 alone.³ But in order to better understand what made ancient Greek drama such a powerful cultural force, it is important to emphasize the differences between the performance of these works in Athens 2,500 years ago and the experience of theatre today. Hence, this book focuses on Greek drama *in* and *as performance*, and seeks to add to our knowledge of the art form by asking how the plays would have affected the audience who experienced them as live performative events.

Most past studies on ancient drama have tended to view the art form either through the prism of the theatrical aesthetics of their own day or primarily as works of literature. A cognitive approach can help define the fundamental differences between ancient Greek drama and the theatre of the 20th and 21st centuries and offer us the means to explore the experiential elements of what made Greek drama so distinctive. This is important if we want to more fully understand how Greek drama functioned, was originally received, and became as popular and influential as it did. With this in mind, I explore these differences and examine some of the key experiential elements of Greek drama: (a) narrative as predictive stimulus; (b) open-air space as a mind-altering property; (c) the mask as an effective emotional material anchor; (d) movement, gestures, and chorality as powerful collective kinesthetic communicators; (e) the properties of music for cognitive absorption; and (f) the dissociative elements of dramatic speech and song. These are placed within a social and political context as part of the empathy-generating *gesamtkunstwerk* of Greek drama. The scope of this book means it is not possible to discuss every element of Greek theatre production in detail, but there has recently been good work on props from cognitive perspectives from Chaston and Mueller, and I hope this study will help encourage more of these types of approaches.⁴ To structure this study, I revisit Aristotle's six constituent parts of tragedy: *muthos* (narrative), *opsis* (visuality), *ethos* (character), *dianoia* (intention), *melos* (music), and *lexis* (words), offering new experiential perspectives on familiar poetic themes. Consequently, although comedy, satyr drama, and dithyramb are all referenced, the focus will be on the performance of fifth-century Athenian tragedy.

This book has four main aims: first, to explore what was so distinctive about classical Athenian drama from an experiential perspective. Second, to demonstrate how the cognitive sciences can help reveal how the ancient theatre operated in performance and also fulfilled a wider cultural role in the creation of social empathy and political discourse. Third, to show how the cognitive sciences can be of great help to those interested in understanding more about the ancient world. In this respect, I hope this book helps develop new models of inquiry that can prove fruitful when applied to many aspects of the study of antiquity. Fourth, in exploring some of the fundamentals of Greek drama, to highlight why there is an

imperative for theatre in democratic Athens and by reflection how theatre can still be of great cultural value today.

The genesis of this study was to ask a most basic question: why did Athenian drama grow to become such a major cultural influence, one that still reverberates around the world today? I argue that it is because of the way in which it originally affected its audiences, not only as they sat in the theatre but also as it impacted their social and political lives. Though we have come to know these plays via the surviving texts, their creation and survival first depended on them being enacted before a live audience in Athens in the fifth century BCE. Therefore, a close study of the affective and experiential aspects of Greek drama is essential and has not been undertaken before from a cognitive perspective. However, there have been some important steps in this direction: in 1980, W. B. Stanford produced a small but influential work, *Greek Tragedy and The Emotions*, that was interested in understanding the emotional power of Greek drama; in 2002, Rush Rehm's *The Play of Space* applied the environmental theories of James Gibson to the performative dynamics of the Greek theatre; in 2010, Felix Budelmann and Pat Easterling began to explore the potential for cognitive approaches to ancient drama; and Douglass Cairns has been profitably exploring Greek literature, including drama, from an emotional perspective for several years now.⁵ In addition to applying cognitive theories to ancient drama, this book will also utilize research from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, robotics, and artificial intelligence, all areas that are interested in the affective and experiential parts of human cognition. Classicists, archaeologists, and ancient historians have been studying the cultures of the ancient Greeks since the Renaissance, albeit refracted via their own various social milieus. If we accept that human cognition is bio-cultural and that cultures are created by human minds, then it would only be prudent to examine the biological side of human cognition when considering an ancient culture. What then can cognitive studies and neuroscience contribute to our understanding of the ancient world? Thomas Habinek provides a lucid answer:

It's not that neuroscience provides definitive answers; rather, by articulating a model of thought and action radically different from those taken for granted by most scholars, neuroscience defamiliarizes the ancient material, opening up new horizons of understanding, much as comparative ethnography and critical theory have done for previous generations of classicists. Neuroscience teaches us very little about the essential nature of the human organism, except that it is constantly changing through "inhabited interaction" with the material universe. But it gives us excellent tools for understanding the constraints upon and characteristics of such interaction. In that sense, it can't help getting inside the heads of humanists, metastasizing into our disciplinary bodies.⁶

One benefit of this interdisciplinary approach is that the clinical aspects of neuroscience allow us to distance ourselves slightly from our own cultural biases when we examine aspects of antiquity. Another is that by thinking with neuroscience,

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we might approach material from a different perspective and form new conclusions. This is certainly a new methodology for classical studies, but several scholars have recently applied neuroscience research and cognitive theory to various facets of the theatre arts with a good deal of success. For example, Rhonda Blair has used neuroscience research to develop a new framework to understand and describe the discipline of acting for the theatre; Evelyn Tribble has explored the mnemonic features of Shakespeare's poetry through the theory of distributed cognition, encompassing the designation of roles, plotlines, spatial considerations, and Elizabethan playbooks; and Naomi Rokotnitz has examined embodiment in drama as a means of changing the somatic identity of actors and audiences and has applied her theories to plays by Shakespeare, Stoppard, Wertebaker, and Kaufman.⁷ Additionally, Bruce McConachie has produced a groundbreaking cognitive study of theatre spectatorship, and John Lutterbie has applied dynamic systems theory and embodied cognition to different theories of actor training.⁸ A recent fruitful interdisciplinary collaboration between Shakespeare scholar Evelyn Tribble and cognitive scientist John Sutton is a proposal to approach historical theatre works from the perspective of a cognitive ecology, which facilitates a systems-level analysis of theatre.⁹ The authors write: "this model of cognitive ecology would posit that a complex human activity such as theater must be understood across the entire system, which includes such elements as neural and psychological mechanisms underpinning the task dynamics." These include the body movements and gestures of the actors, the physical environment including the actor/audience relationship, theatre technologies, economies, social and cultural impacts, prevailing aesthetic preferences, and what the authors describe as "cognitive artifacts" such as parts, plots, and playbooks.

How then might we profitably apply some of the same cognitive approaches to ancient drama? We have little to go on. We possess only seven complete plays of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles, eighteen of Euripides (not including *Rhesus*, which seems to be a fourth-century play), eleven of Aristophanes, and only one complete play of Menander. Even with the other fragments of these and other playwrights, what we have is a small fraction of the total theatrical output of the classical Athenian theatre. Also, the texts do not tell the entire story; they are at best, as Philip Auslander has written, "blueprints for performance."¹⁰ Even the oldest texts and fragments we possess, found on mummy cartonnage and in ancient rubbish dumps in the remains of the Greek communities of Egypt, are still not authorial play scripts but most probably scholastic texts or copies from private libraries. They have no stage directions, and apart from later comments added by the so-called scholiasts, no indication of stagecraft, costume, masks, dance steps, music, or movements. Instead, we are left to make educated inferences from what we can glean from the surviving and sometimes corrupt texts and what we know of the staging conditions of the original play. This last aspect also needs revisiting, as recent archaeological surveys of the site of the Theatre of Dionysos in Athens have questioned established ideas about the size, form, and material of the classical Greek theatre, issues that will be described and addressed in this book.¹¹

A cognitive approach allows us to re-examine the textual, material, and anecdotal evidence of the Greek theatre and place it into an experiential context. This assumes the basic premise that theatre is created to be enacted and consumed by an audience, and in order to be understood it must communicate its intentions and emotions effectively. Therefore, a culture's theatre is a kind of mimetic mind, an artificial construct that mirrors, amplifies, and projects the cognitive regime of the people who have come to experience it. This understanding of the experience of Greek drama stands at the heart of this study.

I have been involved in making and teaching about theatre for nearly 30 years, beginning in 1987 with a student production of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* at University College London's Bloomsbury Theatre. Since then I have worked as a technician, production manager, producer, director, translator, and writer and founded Aquila Theatre in London in 1991. With Aquila I have been lucky enough to stage classical plays all over the world, at venues as diverse as the ancient stadium at Delphi, Carnegie Hall, the Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh, various theatres in New York, London, and Athens, at performing arts centers and festivals throughout North America and Europe, and at two different performances at the White House. In my parallel career as an academic, I have sought to fuse my knowledge and experience of the practical act of making theatre with a scholarly approach to Greek drama. At all times I have been most interested in how Greek theatre worked in performance and approached ancient texts and evidence with a practitioner's eye, albeit one from a different time and culture. Nevertheless, I have always felt an affinity with ancient drama, ever since my Professor of Greek at UCL, Pat Easterling, took one look at me and said, "you should study Aeschylus, he was a soldier like you" (I was serving in the Royal Marines Reserves at the time). One profound moment in my professional career was a time when an older, much-respected actor I once worked with shook my hand and said "now you are only a handshake away from Shakespeare," emphasizing our proximity to the English theatre of 400 years ago. It is nearly 2,500 years to Aeschylus, and there is no unbroken performance tradition, no connective "handshake," but in all my theatrical travels around the world I have found commonalities and affinities among the performance artists of different cultures that also resonate within the ancient works. I hope then that I can add something to the rich corpus of work by classicists on the ancient Greek theatre, and at the same time offer a slightly different perspective, one that is most interested in theatre as a live art form and asks not only *what* Greek theatre represented but *how* it actually worked in practice.

It is certainly not new to exclaim the cultural importance and influence of Greek drama. What is new in this book is the way in which I am approaching the evidence for the ancient stage to try to understand its effect upon its original audience. Though we are able to read many Greek plays today, the act of reading a play is cognitively distinct from watching, listening, sensing, and experiencing the same play performed live. I am most interested in this multisensory experience of theatre. Here I am inspired by the field of cognitive archaeology, which for the past two decades has been interested in how the material record of ancient

cultures reflects ancient thought processes, and how environment and tool use changed human minds. Malafouris and Renfrew have called this “the cognitive life of things” after Ajurn Appadurai’s seminal work *The Social Life of Things*, which explored how material objects have agency and the biological dimension of artifacts.¹² What I find so dynamic about this approach is the basic idea that an ancient artifact is not just an aesthetic object or means of dating, but the actual remnant of an ancient thought process. I think we can view the surviving texts and material evidence for ancient drama in much the same way and apply cognitive theory, neuroscience, and psychological research to better understand the experiential elements of ancient drama within their original context.

Distributed cognition

Renfrew, Malafouris, and other cognitive archaeologists seek to “look beyond the brain itself and emphasize the social and cultural context” and cite the work of Andy Clark, who asserts that “human engagement with the material world plays a central role.”¹³ In this study I draw on these theories of distributed cognition, which posit that the human mind is not situated only in the brain, but is extended via the body out into the environment, in what Andy Clark has described as a “constant cognitive feedback loop.”¹⁴ Various theoretical viewpoints broadly agree with the premise that the mind is not “brainbound,” and they have been grouped together as “4E theory” – that the mind is embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended. These theories of distributed cognition can be valuable tools for comprehending how theatre works and have been profitably applied in recent theatre studies by the scholars mentioned previously.

If we accept the premise that human cognition is extended, then we can start to discern what Edwin Hutchins termed “cognition in the wild,” basically, material elements of cognitive scaffolding that we use to help manage often complex cognitive tasks.¹⁵ Hutchins famously demonstrated the need for air traffic controllers to situate the huge mental task of incoming, taxiing, and outgoing planes on simple paper slips, the manipulation of which proved essential for effective detailed management, despite the availability of powerful computer tools. Malafouris posits that “the content of a mental state is in part determined by elements of the external world, and thus human cognitive skills cannot be studied independent of the external environment.”¹⁶ Extended cognition must therefore include exchanges among people, artifacts, environment, and time. Malafouris uses the example of Mycenaean Linear B tablets and goes beyond the deciphering and translation of the writing system to emphasize the human and material interactions. In this way, what Malafouris calls Material Engagement Theory helps us learn more about ancient labor, social practices, and the communicative pathways, both verbal and textual, that indicate informational exchange in both existing and emergent cultural practices. He describes this methodology as

a shift from the micro level of semantics to the macro level of practice – Linear B is no longer seen as a disembodied abstract code; now it is seen as a situated

technology . . . encompassing reciprocal and culturally orchestrated interactions among humans, situations, tools and space.¹⁷

These kind of cognitive connections among brain, body, material objects, and the environment are mirrored in the very act of creating theatre, which is nothing less than the making of a mimetic on-stage mind. For theatre to function it needs to reflect, heighten, and distribute the cognitive mechanisms of its audience, and therefore we should also be able to learn something of the cognitive regime of the culture within which that particular theatre tradition operated. This has implications for understanding ancient minds, particularly in light of recent advances in the fields of cultural neuroscience and epigenetics, which have shown how culture, environment, and emotional experience deeply affect human cognition.

Whereas I accept that the machinery of the mind is extended out into the environment, that human minds interact with each other, and that materiality plays a vital role in human cognition, these positions should not, however, negate the role of the brain in these processes. Theories of distributed cognition have been attractive to scholars in the humanities, as they can sometimes seem to offer a rejection of more Cartesian computational approaches and neuroscience in general. For example, Alva Noë has stated that neuroscience as a discipline is still quite underdeveloped and compares it to a teenager in the grip of its own technology.¹⁸ To be sure, there is a popular view of neuroscience as deterministic and universalist, a field that seems to some to threaten the very existence of the humanities, but this is not the case. Neuroscience is a broad and diverse field, which I hope to show has much to offer those who study the humanities. Furthermore, many prominent neuroscientists also hold that human cognition is at least partially, if not fully, extended and distributed.¹⁹ For example, Antonio Damasio has stated that “it is not only the separation between mind and brain that is mythical: the separation between mind and body is probably just as fictional. The mind is embedded in the full sense of the term, not just enbrained.”²⁰

Another relatively new area of cognitive science that will be utilized in this study is the area of cultural neuroscience, which has recently exploded the idea of the universal human mind and shown how much culture both shapes cognition and continues to act upon the brain, which remains plastic and mutable throughout a person’s lifetime.²¹ Theories of distributed cognition actually go quite far in reconciling this artificial biological and cultural division by eradicating it altogether and situating the physical brain firmly within the culture within which it constantly learns and responds. For example, Miranda Anderson has successfully applied distributed cognition to Renaissance literature and proposes that the paradigm of the extended mind suggest a means of negotiation:

The social constructionist models that pervade literary studies can be argued to have a physical basis (as our ability to be constructed by sociocultural forces relates to neurological plasticity) at the same time as human extendedness and adaptability (to cultural, physical or linguistic variables) tempers any notion of universals that might be attempted.²²

If the basic theory of distributed cognition is correct, as I believe it is, in holding that the human mind is extended in a feedback loop between brain, body, environment, and back again, then those models that fail to fully incorporate the internal mechanisms of the brain as part of the entire cognitive process should perhaps be as suspect as strict Cartesian computational stances that equally fail to accommodate the mind's embedded bodily and environmental cognitive scaffolding.

Prediction

What we need then is a fully comprehensive theory of human cognition that might successfully merge the computational mechanisms of the brain as observed by neuroscience with the vital distributed scaffoldings with which we operate in the world and the culture that we act in and upon. Enter Andy Clark, the philosopher whose 1998 paper "The Extended Mind," co-authored with David Chalmers, has had so much influence on those working in distributed cognition. In a groundbreaking 2013 paper and his subsequent 2015 book, Clark has sought to reconcile computational models with theories of distributed cognition, including his own, under a broad theory he names "predictive processing."²³ Clark cites this as a "real clue" to the mystery of human cognition, one that won't solve all the conundrums of consciousness, emotions, and intelligent action, but that can be an "umbrella under which to consider (and in some cases rediscover) many of the previous clues."²⁴ Clark sums up prediction as the means by which we "deal rapidly and fluently with an uncertain and noisy world." In this way, the brain uses top-down processing to quickly deal with incoming sensory data, using error messages to make predictions as to what is being experienced. Clark's theory incorporates both the bottom-up sensorial information conveyed by ears, eyes, tongues, noses, skin, proprioception (the sense of the body in space), and interoception (visceral states such as pain and hunger) with the top-down "learned information" stored in the brain. These two concurrent streams meet in a constant informational exchange that can rapidly yield sense-making predictions, what Clark calls a kind of "bootstrap heaven." The home for this "inner prediction engine" is described by Clark as a "mobile embodied agent located in multiple empowering webs of material and social structure."

Clark posits that predictive processing can "offer new tools for thinking about the moment by moment orchestration of neural, bodily and environmental forces into effective transient problem-solving solutions . . . an action orientated engagement machine, an enabling node in patterns of dense reciprocal exchange binding body brain and world."²⁵ Hence, predictive processing goes some way in reconciling the perceived epistemological rift between neuroscience and distributed cognition. But my aim is not to verify or disprove Clark's theory or any of the others I apply in the course of this study. Rather, it is to apply them profitably to certain aspects of what we know of the ancient theatre in the hope that we may come to some new conclusions, and to be emboldened to ask fundamental questions to better understand how ancient drama worked as performance. I examine predictive

processing in more detail in Chapter One and relate it directly to several of Aristotle's concepts of dramatic narrative.

Emotions

We have no contemporary critical responses to the plays and no related writings by the playwrights or performers. What we do possess are the faint glimpses of the response to drama found in other texts from the fifth and fourth centuries, and they are all concerned with the extreme emotionality of the theatre. For example, Herodotus tells us that the early tragedian Phrynichus was fined for "causing the audience to fall into grief" for his play *The Sack of Miletus* (6.21.10); the Sophist Gorgias wrote that performed poetry (drama) "forces its hearers to shudder with terror, shed tears of pity, and yearn with sad longing" (*Helen* 9); Xenophon noted how the actor Callippides could move an audience to tears (*Symposium* 3.11); and Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle all described drama as having the power to "move the soul" (*psychagogia*).²⁶

These kinds of marked emotional responses are why in *Laws* Plato described fourth-century Athens as a *theatrocracy* (3.700–701) and complained of the crowd being swayed politically by their emotions because of the theatre's influence. Around this time, Athenian theatre had grown hugely influential. A new, massive, 16,000-seat stone theatre was constructed on the site of the older, smaller, wooden theatre on the southeast slope of the Acropolis, and a *theoric* fund was established, giving poorer Athenians the means to attend. In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato has his Athenian argue that theatre should be heavily regulated in the ideal city, and only plays that reflected what he thought were "good" values should be permitted. Plato knew the pervasive power of drama and even has his Socrates complain in the *Apology* that the jurors of the large citizen law court judged him on the basis of his comic portrayal in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.²⁷ Aristotle was less severe in his judgment of drama, although in *Poetics* he does seem to offer a somewhat nostalgic view of a classical theatre that he never experienced first-hand. For much of the late twentieth century, Aristotle was spurned by theatre scholars as offering only a literary view of drama,²⁸ but Aristotle has much of value to say on the theatre, though it is surely correct that his *Poetics* should not be held up as any kind of definitive manual for drama. Rather, it is an exploration of the idea that the performance of poetry is a creative art form made up of constituent parts.²⁹ Theatre-making is certainly that, as anyone who has worked through a rehearsal process will know, but where I part company with Aristotle is with the notion that theatre is only a craft (*techné*) that can be completely explained by dissection. Yes, theatre is made by skill, organization, teamwork, and technique, but to work it also needs talent, inspiration, passion, and mystery, things that are ineffable and enigmatic. *Zeitgeist*, fashion, politics, publicity, unintentional tipping points, and celebrity all play their part in helping to make a show successful. Although I am taking a scientific and theoretical approach to drama here, I have tried not to forget the importance of the uncanny and the ineffable when it comes to experiencing theatre. There is certainly validity in Plato's idea of the inspired performer we

find in *Ion*, and although theatre-making is about making sense, some of theatre's finest moments are non-sensical and unintelligible and operate in the realm of the emotions – not the critical or analytical mind.

An intense experience *moves* us and is often manifested physically by an affective state – we say we feel emotions, and indeed we do. Such feelings can involuntarily cause physical changes in that they affect our pulse, the temperature of our skin, our blood pressure, and rate of breathing; we feel chills, shudder, recoil, and gasp; we cry, laugh, shift awkwardly, and cover our eyes. In the theatre, when we sit together with many of our fellow humans, all focused on the same representation of action, the resulting feelings can be greatly magnified. When we watch drama, we may not always feel the same emotional states presented by the actors, but we frequently take a personal position that can be identified as emotional. Even if we are bored, that boredom will be made manifest in an emotional response, like frustration or even anger, and we reflect those emotions bodily and describe them in embodied terms.

But what do we mean when we talk about emotions? What are emotions exactly, and are the emotions we know today the same as those experienced by people from another culture in the distant past? A specific problem we face in embarking on such a study of historical behaviors is that there currently exists no general consensus on what we actually mean by the term “emotion.” Archaeologist Sara Tarlow has put this down to “how we use and intend emotional language” as the reason for the “failed communication between emotional scholars.”³⁰ The classicist G.E.R. Lloyd has also asked a series of important questions about the way we apply the study of emotions to work on the ancient world, among them: does the English language provide an adequate terminology for describing emotions? Are there certain basic emotions, and if so, what are they? Are emotions distinct or do they form a continuum and blend into each other? Are emotions linked to moralities?³¹

The study of human emotions has a long history stretching back to Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle, who all sought to categorize and explain affective states.³² In the modern era, Darwin turned his attention to embodied emotions in his seminal study, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). This work is still highly influential today in the research of the so-called neo-Darwinists, such as Paul Ekman. Ekman's theory of “basic emotions” posits that a finite number of reductive affective states can be visually identified across different cultures. This is one of the most debated positions in affective science today and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Also, in the late 19th century, William James and Carl Lange simultaneously proposed theories of affective states, suggesting that emotions are physiological reactions to external events, the processing of which is dependent on cognitive interpretation, for example, “I tremble and so I feel fear.” James's theory is an early articulation of what has become known as the embodiment theory of emotions, a bio-cultural blend of instinct and interpretation.³³ Today, most theories of emotions fall somewhere between two distinct theoretical positions: “constructionists” or “cultural relativists” posit that emotional states are learned products of culture, whereas the “universalists”

of the psychological or biological school propose that at least some emotions are universal across humans and a product of the evolutionary process. My position is that what we commonly describe as emotions are actually both products of human evolution and refinements of culture, as by adopting the theoretical position of distributed cognition this kind of binary distinction becomes moot. There is also a schism between those who view emotions as resulting from judgment (“appraisal theory”) and others who surmise that emotions can be far more instantaneous. For example, if one suddenly falls, fear arises before the mind has had any time to form an appraisal of what just happened; this is known as “embodiment theory.” The philosopher Jesse Prinz sets out the two positions succinctly in his 2012 book *Beyond Human Nature*; he concluded that there is no convincing evidence that we need appraisal judgments to distinguish different emotions and that “the embodiment theory is probably right.”³⁴ However, I also think that emotions can arise from both embodiment and appraisal and that emotional responses are multisensory, complex, fluid, and mutable.

If emotions are affective expressions of both embodied experiences and inference, then evidence of emotional responses in ancient Greek culture can help us to understand more about the function and reception of ancient drama. However, traditional forms of understanding the ancient world, primarily via textual analysis, can be problematic when considering ancient emotions. Angelos Chaniotis has pointed out that the basic physical elements of emotional experience “do not exist in the study of written sources,” especially when we are “dealing with human beings who died twenty centuries ago,”³⁵ and yet in evolutionary terms there is no biological difference between us and the ancient Greeks. While we do have images from the material cultural evidence, Douglas Cairns has noted that “in spite of the wealth of visual representations of the human body that have survived from the ancient world, we have no means of evaluating the messages that these representations convey . . . that is wholly independent of ancient textual evidence” and then we run into “problems of ethnocentric bias that arise when we use our own terminology to describe the emotions of another culture.”³⁶ Cairns is right to point out the question of cultural bias, but this is also true of any kind of interpretation of ancient material, textual or material. Also, if some “basic” biological commonalities in emotional expression are found across cultures, then we should be able to identify them in ancient representations and understand something about how they were received within that particular culture. On this last point, David Konstan’s seminal study of the emotions of the ancient Greeks delineates “significant differences” between ancient emotions and our own, the recognition of which is essential for understanding Greek literature and culture. He does concede, however, that basic universal biological “affects” may exist at a deeper level.³⁷

A solution to this problem of ethnocentric bias has been proposed by the historian Barbara Rosenwein, who suggested that the affective information gleaned from other cultures, particularly those of the past, be assessed by collating information about the emotional regime of that society, or what she has called “emotional communities.”³⁸ Rosenwein’s approach includes gathering the source

material for the group in question, problematizing their emotional terminology, consulting the theorists of that period, weighing emotional attitudes to assess the relative value placed on each emotion, and then going further and looking for emotions in “silences,” metaphors, and ironies; considering the social role they play; and then tracing changes in attitudes to emotions over time.

At first sight, Rosenwein’s methodology in developing a history of emotions seems entirely constructivist, yet she writes that “a history of emotions must not deny the biological substratum of emotions, since it is clear that they are embodied on both the body and the brain.” For Rosenwein, the differences between constructionist and biological approaches are not inseparable. She suggests that any history of emotions must address the distinctive characteristics of the society under scrutiny, and she adds, “even bodies (and brains) are shaped by culture.”³⁹

My position is also bio-cultural in that I accept that all humans have shared certain physical and chemical biological commonalities for the last 80,000 years or so.⁴⁰ Additionally, I agree that an evolutionary process that developed to respond to environmental stimuli has honed human affective states. But this does not mean that the human mind is fixed and universal across cultures. On the contrary, human biology is highly plastic – for example, the nascent field of epigenetics has shown how DNA can be altered in as little as one generation in response to extreme environmental factors such as stress.⁴¹ Even within one lifetime, brain networks are adaptable, and individuals can reorder existing brain processes while learning a language, playing a musical instrument, mastering a sport, and so on.⁴² Yet, our shared human biology does make many elements of our lives universal, whether we like it or not. For example, it may be culture and lifestyle that produce a diet that leads to a blocked artery, but all of us have an increased chance of survival if we receive chest compressions and the heart-stopping reset of a defibrillator, whether we live in London or Lima, regardless of the ethnic group from which we hail. Likewise, affective states and perceptual processes are both biological and cultural, and the two are interconnected, which can be observed in the way in which certain cultural practices developed. For example, in Chapter Two I take a biological view of the Theatre of Dionysos and explore the way in which the open-air environment of the ancient theatre affected the neurochemistry of the people who gathered there and helped promote abstract thought.⁴³

I also take the position that human cultures are the embodied expressions of shared human minds responding to basic biological needs and environmental stimuli in a constant cognitive feedback loop. Survival, food production, shelter, group dynamics, reproduction, and safety are just a few of the basic cultural factors that mitigate cognition and call for neuroplasticity. In this respect, differences in culture stem from environmental disparities and differing cognitive solutions to the same basic underlying survival needs. Human culture is the manifestation of the extended and distributed social mind – put simply, minds make culture and culture makes minds. Classicist Thomas Habinek has expressed a similar position: “it is human nature to construct cultural diversity, and what we call culture alters the biological ‘nature’ of both individuals and the species.”⁴⁴ Human biology and human culture are therefore inextricably linked – we are all bio-cultural

beings, and we share a basic biology with the ancient Greeks; it is our cultures that are different, and they are manifestations of distributed minds.

The particular subject of Greek tragedy and the emotions was taken up in the early 1980s by classicist W. B. Stanford, who categorized emotionalism in the theatre into three broad categories: (1) the mood of the audience, (2) the physical and psychological conditions of the performance, and (3) the nature of the plays being performed.⁴⁵ Stanford emphasized the connections between the theatre and emotional responses but framed tragedy as a “civilizing” development out of an older orgiastic cult of Dionysos. In so doing, he negated some of its more ineffable embodied affective elements, by presenting the idea of the development of more “rational” drama. All we have to do is look again at works such as Euripides’ *Bacchae*, produced at the end of the fifth century and therefore, according to Stanford’s theory, the most “rational” Greek play we should have, to realize that the Greeks were still fascinated with the ineffable and irrational aspects of their theatre encapsulated by this most uncanny of plays. Nevertheless, Stanford’s compact study did set out a useful taxonomy of emotional expressions in Greek drama and examined song, noises, cries and silences, music and the spoken word, and certain visual aspects, and I will explore some of these from a cognitive perspective in Chapter Six. One major criticism I have of Stanford’s study is that it reflects the prevailing view that the dramatic mask was a fixed, immovable visage that “distanced” the audience in a kind of Brechtian emotional disengagement. Neuroscience studies on facial processing can help us understand that this was not at all the case and that the mask needs to be seriously reappraised as one of the main conveyers of embodiment and emotionality in Greek drama. This will be explored in detail in Chapter Three.

A bio-cultural approach to an important aspect of an ancient culture has been recently advanced by Garrett Fagan, who has applied studies in modern crowd psychology to analyze Roman responses to organized spectacles of violence. He terms his approach “psychobiological” and writes that “an interdependence between contextual stimulus and psychological propensity shapes behavior.”⁴⁶ Fagan makes the important point that if there were not basic human universal psychological functions across different cultures, then “alien societies ought to remain virtually impenetrable to an outsider,” and with this in mind, “it is possible for modern minds to comprehend, analyze and even empathize with the actions of people in other historical eras.”⁴⁷ This is certainly true of ancient drama – while modern audiences may not grasp the significance of certain ritual actions, religious beliefs, or cultural practice, they can still be moved by the incidents that arise from them.⁴⁸

An important bio-cultural theory of affective states has also been used by Robert Kaster to examine Roman texts for affective information. The psychologist Silvan Tomkins proposed “Affect Theory” – that there are nine hard-wired emotional responses – which he described as “the biological portion of emotion” mediated by socio-cultural factors.⁴⁹ Tomkins then proposed “script theory,” which posited that when a human is affected by an emotion, the cognitive responses following the basic biological reaction form a kind of behavioral “script,” which is also