



Reaching Athens

Community, Democracy and
Other Mythologies in Adaptations
of Greek Tragedy

Margherita Laera

Peter Lang

NEW COMPARATIVE CRITICISM

‘Margherita Laera tackles a fundamental problem of our times: what do we do with our ancestors and with the myths of Greek tragedy and democracy? This is an ambitious project and an excellent piece of scholarship.’

—PATRICE PAVIS, Professor of Theatre Studies, Korea National University of the Arts

‘This book articulates original, important and wide-ranging arguments with elegance and verve. A stimulating deconstruction of myth, in the Barthesian sense of that word.’

—CARL LAVERY, Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance, Aberystwyth University

Why do revivals and adaptations of Greek tragedy still abound in European national theatres, fringe stages and international festivals in the twenty-first century? Taking as its starting point the concepts of myth developed by Jean-Luc Nancy and Roland Barthes and the notion of the ‘classical’ outlined by Salvatore Settis, this book analyses discourses around community, democracy, origin and Western identity in stage adaptations of Greek tragedy on contemporary European stages. The author addresses the ways in which the theatre produces and perpetuates the myth of ‘classical’ Greece as the origin of Europe and how this narrative raises issues concerning the possibility of a transnational European community. Each chapter explores a pivotal problem in modern appropriations of Greek tragedy, including the performance of the chorus, the concept of the ‘obscene’ and the audience as the *demos* of democracy. Modern versions of *Women of Troy*, *Hippolytus* and *Persians* performed in Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Poland and Greece are analysed through a series of comparative case studies. By engaging with the work of prominent theatre-makers such as Mark Ravenhill, Michel Vinaver, Katie Mitchell, Sarah Kane, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Romeo Castellucci, Calixto Bieito and Rimini Protokoll, this volume offers a critique of contemporary democratic Europe and the way it represents itself onstage.

MARGHERITA LAERA is a Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent.



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To my parents, Maria and Franco

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Note on Style and Referencing System	xi
List of Illustrations	xiii
INTRODUCTION	
De-mythologizing the 'Classical'	i
CHAPTER 1	
An Uninvited Guest: The Problem of the Chorus	61
CHAPTER 2	
Off Stage: The 'Obscene' and the Limits of Representation	133
CHAPTER 3	
The 'Democratic' Audience: Greek Theatre and Western Self-Definition	203
CONCLUSION	
Reaching Athens	263
Bibliography	281
Production Details	303
Index	305

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Note on Style and Referencing System

I have used inverted commas to indicate complex and often contested notions such as the 'classical', the 'obscene', 'origin', 'democracy', 'universal', and so on. Inverted commas also indicate that a term or phrase is a shifting notion which varies according to ideological approaches and historical, theoretical or cultural contexts. References to online books (mainly Project Gutenberg Ebooks) have been limited to where the source is not widely available in UK libraries. I do not provide paragraph numbers for quotations from online books or websites. For works in translation that are available in many editions, such as Latin or Greek texts, I reference verse numbers (or Bekker numbers for Aristotle) to facilitate consultation of the source material in any edition. Where a specific translation has been used in my investigations, I have referenced that specific edition and not verse numbers.

Illustrations

- Figure 1 T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, dir. by E. Martin Browne, Westminster Theatre, London, 1939. Photograph by Angus McBean. © Houghton Library, Harvard Theatre Collection. MS Thr 581 (C-329-28). The Eumenides, a silent masked chorus. 93
- Figure 2 Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Tragedia Endogonidia, B.#3*, dir. by Romeo Castellucci, Hebbel Theater, Berlin, 2003. Photograph © Luca del Pia. Stuffed rabbits sitting in the stalls replace the audience. 101
- Figure 3 Aeschylus, *L'Orestie*, dir. by Olivier Py, Odéon, Paris, 2008. Photograph by Alain Fonteray, courtesy of Théâtre de l'Odéon. The singing chorus, wearing laurel crowns and holding books in their hands. 104
- Figure 4 Euripides, *Women of Troy*, dir. by Katie Mitchell, National Theatre, London, 2008. Photograph © Stephen Cumminskey. The chorus of women dancing the quick-step without partners. 107
- Figure 5 Michel Vinaver, *Las Troyanas*, dir. by Ramon Simó, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2002. Photograph © Teresa Miró. Cassandra holding torches opposite the chorus, next to Troy's defensive wall. 113
- Figure 6 Michel Vinaver, *11 settembre 2011*, dir. by Ramon Simó, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2002. Photograph © Teresa Miró. The same wall as in *Las Troyanas* is used as memory wall for the 9/11 attacks. 113
- Figure 7 Mark Ravenhill, *Women of Troy*, dir. by Roxana Silbert (Paines Plough), Village Underground, London, 2008. Photograph © Stephen Cumminskey. The image shows the chorus of three Trojan women. 131
- Figure 8 Societas Raffaello Sanzio, *Purgatorio*, dir. by Romeo Castellucci, Châteaublanc, Parc des Expositions, Avignon, 2008. Photograph © Luca del Pia. The Son forgives the Father after the scene of sexual abuse. 187

- Figure 9 Nowy Teatr, *(A)pollonia*, dir. by Krzysztof Warlikowski, Nowy Teatr, Warsaw, 2009. Photograph by Stefan Okolowicz, courtesy of Nowy Teatr. The image shows Alcestis being caught by Thanatos, smearing lipstick on the glass bathroom walls. 198
- Figure 10 Calixto Bieito and Pau Miró, *Los Persas: Requiem por un soldado*, dir. by Calixto Bieito, Teatre Romea, Barcelona, 2008. Photograph by David Ruano, courtesy of Teatre Romea. Spanish soldiers and Jerjes' father, Darius, despairing on a sofa. 248
- Figure 11 Aeschylus, *Die Perser*, dir. by Dimiter Gotscheff, Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 2006. Photograph © Iko Freese. Two men push a rotating wall in the middle of the stage. 253
- Figure 12 Rimini Protokoll, *Breaking News*, dir. by Hegard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, Schauspiel Frankfurt, Frankfurt, 2008. Photograph by Daniel Wetzel, courtesy of the company. Two journalists comment on news from Iraq. 256
- Figure 13 Rimini Protokoll, *Prometheus in Athens*, dir. by Stefan Kaegi, Hegard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, Theatre of Herodes Atticus, Athens, 2010. Photograph © Charis Bilios. The chorus of Athenian citizens stand behind banners upon which the names of their chosen characters have been handwritten (from left to right): No one, Prometheus, Hermes and Kratos. 270
- Figure 14 Rimini Protokoll, *Prometheus in Athens*, dir. by Stefan Kaegi, Hegard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, Theatre of Herodes Atticus, Athens, 2010. Photograph © Charis Bilios. The chorus of Athenian citizens form a pyramid below a projection saying: 'We know that at the end of the trilogy, Prometheus will win.' 274

INTRODUCTION

De-Mythologizing the ‘Classical’

Why are Greek tragedies so frequently revived and adapted on European stages? What makes them so popular? Attempts to answer this question have often emphasized the alleged universality of the ‘classics’, their ability to survive and continue to be relevant through the ages. It has become a commonplace, for instance, to suggest that ‘if we want to understand the modern Western world, we need to look back to the Greeks.’¹ Ironically, whilst I write this book in late 2012, these narratives of ‘origin’ overlap with anxieties about societal collapse, as Greece’s public debt seriously threatens the European Union and Eurozone. In the present study, I argue that the mythologies surrounding ‘classical’ Athens, as articulated and disseminated through theatre and performance, might illuminate how ‘we’, the people of Europe, imagine ourselves and negotiate our place in the world. The present study sets out to investigate these mythologies and assess their significance for theatre-makers, scholars and audiences alike.

In his book *The Future of the ‘Classical’*, Salvatore Settis examines Western cultural history through its successive ideological appropriations of Greco-Roman antiquity. Arguing that ‘classical’ values, as developed by the Greeks and mediated through the Romans, ‘have been used in the past few

1 From the back cover of Charlotte Higgins, *It’s All Greek to Me: From Homer to the Hippocratic Oath, How Ancient Greece Has Shaped Our World* (London: Short Books, 2008). In this book, I am primarily concerned with Greek tragedy, and not comedy. This is, on the one hand, because tragedy is adapted and staged more often than comedy. On the other, because tragedy is often perceived as more ‘universal’ and more ‘archetypal’ than comedy. Tragedy is therefore more deeply entangled with the production of mythical narratives around ‘classical’ Greece than comedy.

generations to legitimize the West's hegemony over the rest of the world', Settis analyses the mechanisms through which mainstream discourses construct Greek history as universal, perpetuating an idea of 'classical' Greece as the mythical origin of Western civilization, often underpinning conceptions of Western superiority.² Such ahistorical appropriations of ancient Greek culture have functioned, and still function, as shared transnational myths throughout the West, particularly in Western Europe. In his study, Settis contrasts the static nature of the 'classical' as a crystallized past with the 'dynamism of nostalgia or repetition', seen as the 'recurring obsession', which periodically steers the West towards the need to resuscitate this past.³ His brief but compelling investigation exposes the politics of the 'classical' and offers insight into how Greek art came to be regarded as the 'essence' of the West. Interrogating the cyclical 'rebirths' of the 'classical' in Western cultural history, Settis proposes that the West's specificity vis-à-vis other civilizations lies precisely in the way it articulates its relationship to its own past. Although mythical narratives of death and rebirth of the world are typical of many cultures (Settis analyses Amerindian and Indian tales, but many more could be added to the list), what distinguishes the West in his view is a nostalgic cult of its own archaeological ruins and, crucially, its construction of historical time as mythical time through a cult of 'classical' heritage. This overlapping of mythical time and historical time has also informed methodological paradigms for historical scholarship, contributing to the 'construction of a model for cultural history in terms of continuous, repeated and cyclical deaths and rebirths'.⁴ Seen from this perspective, Settis continues, the period known as the 'Renaissance' can be perceived as a 'rebirth' of 'classical' antiquity, along with the Carolingian renaissance, the Holy Roman Empire, Neoclassicism, and so on. Settis reminds us that this assimilation of myth and history is precisely what facilitates conceptions of Greek art as timeless, as opposed to culturally

2 Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the 'Classical'*, trans. Allan Cameron (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 12.

3 Ibid., p. 16.

4 Ibid., p. 97. I am referring to works such as Jacob Burckhardt's 1860 study, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

or historically determined: in other words, this is what makes it 'classical'. In the cultural framework described by Settis, through the marginalization of Classical Studies in education, dominant Western discourses turn 'classical' cultural products into two-dimensional icons, allowing processes of de-historicization to take place. These mechanisms, by which 'classical' Greece is imagined as 'origin' of the Western community, are inherently mythological, and it is crucial, therefore, that we examine them as such.⁵

In particular, this book investigates how mythical narratives around 'classical' Greece are produced, reproduced and negotiated in the theatre through adaptations of Athenian tragedies. While Settis discusses ideological appropriations of Greco-Roman history mainly through architecture and the visual arts, I believe the theatre is one of the key sites where such mythologies are disseminated in the twenty-first century. By performing ancient drama as the 'origin' of Western theatre and the foundation of Western identity, theatre becomes a paradigmatic device for blurring the distinction between myth and history. As the spectators' identification with the performance is fostered through actualizations of 'classical' themes and the domestication of their foreignness, adaptations of Greek tragedy for a contemporary audience function as complex self-reflexive rituals: while taking place here and now, they point to their half-mythical, half-historical counterparts, namely open-air theatre festivals in fifth-century Athens; while addressing themselves to contemporary audiences, they raise parallels between them and their 'ancestors', the alleged 'inventors' of theatre. When reviving and adapting Greek tragedy, I suggest, performances simply cannot avoid evoking these mythologies, as they have become too widely influential across the West, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century. I believe, however, that it is possible to critique these mythologies through performance, though sadly this is not often the case in contemporary productions. Throughout this study I will examine some of the ways in which narratives around 'classical' Athens and its theatre have provided key notions for Western identification and self-definition, specifically in recent decades. As I will argue, questions concerning identity and

5 For a definition of the notion of myth, see pp. 16–23.

community are often at stake in contemporary stagings of Greek tragedy. By presenting ‘classical’ tragedy as ‘ours’, and by performing it in accordance with familiar theatrical conventions, identification mechanisms are fostered between audiences and the Greeks.

One of the central issues raised by performances of Greek tragedy in contemporary theatres is the idea of community. As Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, Athenian drama today is seen as the ‘political (civil) presentation of the philosophical’ and the ‘philosophical presentation of the political’: in other words, it appears to ‘us’ as the quintessential ‘presentation of being-together’, that is, of community.⁶ The tragic chorus, which in the fifth century BC was a singing and dancing ensemble played by Athenian citizens, established a connection between the spectators gathered at the theatre and the heroes of mythology; it now articulates correspondences between itself and contemporary audiences, while also pointing to its half-mythical, half-historical counterpart performed by the *demos* of Athenian democracy. Although it has become difficult for contemporary audiences to see the Greek chorus as familiar for reasons which I will discuss in Chapter 1, the collective figure remains an imagined presentation of a ‘democratic’ community which produces, by reflecting and distorting, the congregation of spectators.

This book will therefore focus on theatrical problems around the notion of community as they emerge in modern and contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedies. Chapter 1 will investigate past and current approaches to the tragic chorus and the politics of affective responses to the collective figure in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By analysing a selected number of key examples in the history of the chorus, I aim to demonstrate that the aesthetic and the political are simultaneously at play in the general ambivalence of contemporary audiences and theatre-makers alike towards this implausible and unlikely device. I identify a major paradigm change in the understanding of the chorus in the beginning of the twentieth century – namely, the decline of unison – and investigate

6 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 71.

ideological and aesthetic reasons that might explain the shift towards fragmentation. I argue that capitalism's ambiguous relationship with the notion of community, alongside its association with democratic ideology, inform contemporary attitudes to the collective character, prompting approaches that simultaneously affirm and deny the performability of the chorus. The myth that Western capitalist society, perceived as individualistic, is incompatible with community, and therefore with performances of the chorus, will be analysed for its nostalgic implications. While two recent adaptations of Euripides' *Women of Troy*, by Michel Vinaver (2003) and Mark Ravenhill (2008), will serve as the main case studies for my investigations into contemporary approaches to the chorus, I also discuss works by Katie Mitchell, Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Olivier Py.

By definition, a community is a territory (not necessarily a physical one) characterized by familiarity, outside of which stand various degrees of otherness. In order to imagine itself and negotiate its place in the world, a community needs to establish material and immaterial boundaries that demarcate its inside from its outside. It is through acts of exclusion, therefore, that a community comes into being. Such imagined boundaries, which do not necessarily exist in the physical world, often manifest themselves in visual cultures. This is why, in the 'presentation of being-together' that is Greek tragedy, what stands outside its imagined limits or, crucially, is imagined to stand outside of them, is pivotal in assessing the kind of community implied through, and produced by, a performance. Drawing on aesthetic, moral and legal issues, Chapter 2 examines what is often imagined to have been excluded from Greek tragic performances through a popular but false etymology of the word 'obscene', allegedly meaning 'offstage'. According to this derivation, the term 'obscene' originally referred to what was left offstage by 'classical' tragedy, namely death and violence. The notion of the 'obscene' constitutes what stands outside, or is imagined to stand outside, a community's 'accepted standards' of public visibility by virtue of its alleged potential to disrupt the community's cohesiveness. I investigate the false etymology and the beliefs it has produced as articulating puritanical anxieties about propriety, which comment on the visual exclusions of our own aesthetic regime, rather than offering any insight into fifth-century Greek theatre. A comparative study of intertextual adaptations of the myth

of Phaedra will underpin my investigation into the limits of representation, while Societàs Raffaello Sanzio's *Purgatorio* (2009) and Krzysztof Warlikowski's (*A*)*pollonia* (2009) will be analysed in relation to their treatment of 'obscenity' and the management of the visual field.

Chapter 3 examines the myth of the simultaneous birth of theatre and 'democracy' and its implications for contemporary performance. More specifically, the chapter focuses on how ideological constructions of the audience of Greek tragedy, seen as the participating *demos* of 'democracy', are played out in contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedy. Through a comparative analysis of recent adaptations of Aeschylus' *The Persians* by Peter Sellars (1993), Dimiter Gotscheff (2006), Calixto Bieito (2008) and Rimini Protokoll (2008), I will argue that the idea of the theatre audience as an essentially 'democratic' community reinforces the current polarization of a 'free' West versus a 'totalitarian' East. The emphasis on the 'democratic' nature of Greek theatre suggests an appropriation of 'classical' tragedy by neoliberal discourses in an attempt to define the West in terms of individual freedom, empowerment and participation, which retrospectively elevate Athenian democracy as a model for our current political system, despite its exclusion of women, foreigners and slaves.

West, Europe and Western Europe

The geopolitical entity usually referred to as 'the West' is a shifting notion whose homogeneity is largely imagined and ideologically constructed.⁷ The United States and Europe, usually perceived as forming the core of the 'Western community', are themselves internally constituted by irreducible differences and heterogeneity. This study will focus on some of

7 For the concept of 'imagined political community', which informs my thinking in this area, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edn (London: Verso, 2006).

the narratives that enable the idea of a transnational European (and, by extension, Western) community, which by no means coincides with what is understood as the European Union, to circulate in public-sphere discourses and produce subjective identities. I will speculate on the ways in which performances of Greek tragedy enable generic concepts of Western identity to be disseminated and perpetuated transnationally on European stages, specifically in Western Europe. I will argue that, since the second half of the twentieth century, 'classical' Greece has provided a myth of 'origin' in relation to which European 'democracies' define themselves and reinforce their identity on the international and global stage. While I do not wish to suggest that appropriations of ancient Greece are a specifically European phenomenon, I speculate on the ways in which the myth of 'classical' Athens works in conjunction with how European identity is imagined in the context of Europe's political and economic unification in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Therefore, the notions of Europe and West will be discussed primarily as imaginary constructions, rather than in their historical and socio-political complexity, because mythological thinking does not allow for subtle distinctions to be made.

As the unfinished project of the European Union is yet again set to renegotiate its physical and imaginary boundaries following the Eurozone crisis, the desire for a shared European future is constantly counterbalanced by centrifugal forces and an emphasis on the irreducible differences between member states and their interests. The opening-up of trade, job markets and frontiers, as well as monetary unification, the creation of the European Parliament and the negotiation of the European Constitution have sought to promote, but have largely failed to achieve, mechanisms through which the general public might identify with European institutions. On many occasions, the European project has struggled to capture the hearts and minds of the European people, who have felt alienated from a distant, unaccountable and hostile political machine. However, the dream of peaceful cooperation between European peoples rests on the possibility of negotiating a cultural common ground where transnational identifications can co-exist with national identities. Although the idea of a shared cultural background for European peoples remains a political project more than a historical reality, Athenian mythologies have the

potential to attenuate national distinctions, themselves products of essentialist myths about nation. But can the ‘classical’ ever become a basis, to borrow Nancy’s words, for our ‘being-in-common – precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being’?⁸

In his 1935 Vienna lecture entitled ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity’, Edmund Husserl argued that the essence of the ‘European Man’ could be found in the emergence of philosophy and sciences in Greece in the seventh and sixth centuries BC:

Spiritually Europe has a birthplace. By this I do not mean a geographical place, in some one land, though this too is true. I refer, rather, to a spiritual birthplace in a nation or in certain men or groups of men belonging to this nation. It is the ancient Greek nation in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. In it there grows up a new kind of attitude of individuals toward their environing world. Consequent upon this emerges a completely new type of spiritual structure, rapidly growing into a systematically rounded cultural form that the Greeks called philosophy. Correctly translated, in its original sense, this bespeaks nothing but universal science, science of the world as a whole, of the universal unity of all being. Very soon the interest in the totality and, by the same token, the question regarding the all-embracing becoming and the resulting being begin to particularize themselves in accord with the general forms and regions of being. Thus philosophy, the one science, is ramified into the various particular sciences. In the emergence of philosophy in this sense, a sense, that is, which includes all sciences, I see – no matter how paradoxical this may seem – the original phenomenon of spiritual Europe.⁹

Husserl’s essentialist vision of Europe, which included the United States but excluded, for example, Roma populations, persists today in the imaginary life of contemporary Europeans; interestingly, however, today’s emphasis has shifted towards the sixth and the fifth centuries BC, that is, from

8 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 29 and passim.

9 Edmund Husserl, ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity’, lecture delivered in Vienna, 10 May 1935, originally published in Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 149–92 (pp. 158–59); also available online at <http://www.users.cloud9.net/~bradmcc/husserl_philcris.html> [accessed 4 May 2010].

the birth of philosophy to the birth of 'democracy'.¹⁰ The insistence on a shared European heritage dating back to Greco-Roman antiquity effectively proposes to forget more than 2,500 years of cultural, religious and political conflicts among European peoples, marginalizing alternative ways of imagining Europe, and imposing a hegemonic narrative on all European minorities. Theatre plays a key role in perpetuating these mythologies; it is a place where the notions of 'Europe' and 'West' can be collectively imagined and disseminated, either challenging or reinforcing dominant discourses. A desire to revive an imagined European identity through its 'foundations' might be considered as a cultural response to the processes of unification and democratization throughout the continent and, more recently, to the so-called 'age of uncertainty'.¹¹ While Europe's and the Western world's economic, political and cultural hegemony are being challenged by a multiplicity of increasingly influential others (such as Islamic states and organizations, but also China, Russia and India), anxieties about the future consolidate self-legitimizing narratives. Today the idea of Europe, first conceived by the Greeks as the land of freedom and self-determination in opposition to Asia, the land of slavish 'barbarians' (see Chapter 3), is reborn as a confederation of liberal democracies whose Eastern other still constitutes its 'obscene' territory.

Modern and contemporary performances of 'classical' texts, such as the plays of Shakespeare or Ibsen, have contributed to establishing a

- 10 See Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, pp. 155–56, where he writes: 'We may ask, "How is the spiritual image of Europe to be characterized?" This does not mean Europe geographically, as it appears on maps, as though European man were to be in this way confined to the circle of those who live together in this territory. In the spiritual sense it is clear that to Europe belong the English dominions, the United States, etc., but not, however, the Eskimos or Indians of the country fairs, or the Gypsies, who are constantly wandering about Europe. Clearly the title Europe designates the unity of a spiritual life and a creative activity – with all its aims, interests, cares and troubles, with its plans, its establishments, its institutions.'
- 11 For this phrase, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). By his definition of the period, although he does not give precise dates, the 'age of uncertainty' began in the last few decades of the twentieth century and is still relevant into the 2000s.

repertoire in which the European community, if there is one, might recognize itself. But what makes a Greek tragedy captivating in a specific way is that it functions not simply as one of many European canonical texts; its half-mythical, half-historical status reaches us as an emblem of shared 'origin' for European peoples that has no parallels, except for the Bible. As Settis has argued, 'classical' Greek values such as beauty and balance have been perpetuated through modernity as pre-ideological universals, not as historically determined principles. Through the mythologies associated with Greek tragedy, it is 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'participation' that are constructed as timeless, simply the *sine qua non* of Western civilization.¹² While providing a platform for the creation of a strong cultural identity for an imagined 'European community', the de-ideologization and de-historicization of Greek tragedy and Athenian democracy underpin narratives of cultural superiority that often end up reinforcing and legitimizing the status quo. This happens, specifically, when Greek theatre is domesticated and appropriated as 'our own', which obscures its historical distance and cultural otherness vis-à-vis contemporary Western society.¹³ When adaptations make Greek tragedy's foreignness 'accessible' to contemporary audiences, the historical and cultural distance separating 'us' from 'classical' Athenians seemingly disappears; actualization, therefore, deceives contemporary spectators into the belief that 'we' really came out of Athens. If Greek tragedy is subsumed into the logic of familiar dramatic conventions, if the Greek stories about the Trojan and Persian wars, their accounts of the conflicts between individual will and destiny, their moral dilemmas and symbolic systems, are adapted to speak of 'our' wars, 'our'

12 Settis, *The Future of the 'Classical'*, pp. 100–1.

13 For the term 'domesticating', I am indebted to Lawrence Venuti's thinking about literary translation. Venuti writes: 'the aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political'. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 18. See also idem, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998).

conflicts, 'our' dilemmas, the implied suggestion is that 'we, Europeans' are fundamentally like fifth-century Athenians; but the reality is that we like to imagine ourselves to be. Crucially, however, the foreignness of the chorus always raises aesthetic and political problems for contemporary adaptors, presenting itself as the residue of an irreducible alterity (see Chapter 1).

In the course of this book, I suggest that there is a fundamental connection between the establishment of liberal democracy as a dominant political and economic system in Europe and a renewed interest in Greek drama. Although the rise of democratic ideology in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century is linked to the project of unification, the proliferation of mythologies transcends the geographical borders of the political and economic community, the expansion of which has continued from the 1950s well into the twenty-first century. The idea of an intrinsic European culture and thought as distinct from that of other continents by far precedes the birth of the European Union. However, the notion of democracy only began to be associated with the project of a unified Europe after the end of World War II. When the United States' Marshall Plan was agreed to sustain economic prosperity in Western Europe and contain the rise of communism, effectively prompting the establishment of free-trade market economies and liberal governments, the 'American dream' and its values spread across the region. In the 1950s, when the first political decisions were taken to establish economic cooperation between Western European states, Eastern European countries refused the US aid package under Stalin's pressure and were eventually colonized by Russia.¹⁴ As Tony Judt has argued, 'the [Marshall] Plan itself did not contribute by its design to the definitive drawing of Cold War lines in Europe, but its timing and implementation served to accentuate the significance of the divisions at a crucial moment.'¹⁵ During the Cold War, then, Eastern European coun-

14 The European Coal and Steel Community was negotiated in 1950 between Germany and France. The European Economic Community was founded in 1958. For an introduction to the history of the Europe, see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Heinemann, 2005).

15 Tony Judt, 'Introduction', in Martin Schain, ed., *The Marshall Plan: Fifty Years After* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 1–9 (p. 5).

tries did not officially embrace democratic ideology and its narratives of 'origin'; however, stagings of Greek tragedy were not rare, and the 'classical' tradition was well established. Although exploring the ways in which Eastern European theatre-makers and audiences appropriated the 'classics' might make an interesting line of enquiry, in mapping the central motifs of the book, I have chosen to focus mainly on Western Europe, an imagined territory defined precisely by the hegemony of democratic mythologies.¹⁶

Athenian, Liberal and Radical Democracy

Many have noted how misleading confluences of historical and imaginary practices inform and multiply the meanings of the notion of democracy (from the Greek *demokratia*, people power). Stratifications and complications are highlighted, for instance, by Raymond Williams, who offers a brief critique of the concept and links its fluctuating uses and indeterminacy with the vast array of interpretations given to the idea of 'people power'.¹⁷ Williams examines the distinctions between direct and representative democracy, and between the socialist and liberal democratic traditions, which gave rise to profoundly disparate understandings of popular sovereignty. It is not my intention here to discuss the details of Athenian democracy in the fifth century BC, nor to contrast them to representative democracy in the liberal Western world.¹⁸ As I shall note in Chapter 3, asso-

16 For a study of the 'classical' tradition in Central and Eastern Europe, see Craig Kallendorf, ed., *A Companion to the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 132–55. See also Lorna Hardwick, 'Ancient Greek Drama in the Modern European Stage: Identities and Performance', in Cristina Chimisso, ed., *Exploring European Identities* (Milton Keynes: Open University Worldwide, 2003), pp. 263–310.

17 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), pp. 93–98.

18 For an examination of democracy in ancient Athens, see John Peter Rhodes, ed., *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

ciations between two distinct political systems have been actively pursued, sometimes with teleological undertones.¹⁹ However, it will be useful at this stage to outline some of the key elements in 'classical' Athenian democracy that have captured the Western liberal imagination. Conventionally, scholars credit Cleisthenes, an aristocratic leader of the city, with the 'invention' of what was then known as *isonomia* (equality before the law): democracy, in fact, was a pejorative term coined by Greek critics of the system. Cleisthenes' constitutional reform in 508–7 BC reorganized the administrative divisions of the Athenian population based on the geographical area of residence (the *deme*) rather than, as previously, on family relations, and simultaneously established more egalitarian regulations, based on the *demes*, for accessing the *boulé*, the legislative body charged with proposing new laws to the *ekklesia*, the assembly of Athenian citizens. This meant that the right to participate in legal procedures was more fairly distributed among male Athenians. Later reforms by Ephialtes and Pericles during the fifth century perfected the early democratic system: the *areopagus* (the aristocratic assembly of elders) was gradually stripped of its dominance, and participation in public bodies such as the *ekklesia* became financially retributed, so that not only the rich could afford to take part. Athenian democracy is often contrasted with liberal democracy because most of its offices were assigned by lot, and laws were voted directly by the citizens gathered in the assembly, rather than by an elected parliament entrusted with power by representation. However, in 'classical' Athens, only adult male citizens whose parents were both Athenians enjoyed full political rights; women, foreigners and slaves were of course excluded from politics, and the poor effectively had no access to influential elected offices, such as that of *strategós* (army general), which still favoured aristocratic figures such as Pericles. After the loss of independence to the Macedons in 338 BC, Greek city states, along with the Athenian democratic system, were effectively subdued to foreign monarchic rule, although Athens was allowed to nominally keep its institutions in place for several centuries, even under the first period of Roman domination.

19 See Chapter 3, pp. 215–33.

Athens' egalitarian reforms, albeit with their fundamental exclusions and the relics of an aristocratic society, remained, for more than two millennia, isolated experiments in the direct participation in power by citizens. But their significance acquired greater importance in modern times, when egalitarian ideologies began to spread among the middle-classes in North America and Europe in conjunction with the consolidation and radicalization of liberal capitalism.²⁰ Although a representational system with professional politicians and an elected government had replaced a popular assembly and the participation of citizens chosen by lot, the name chosen to refer to the modern practice, 'democracy', was the same that Plato and Aristotle had used for the ancient Athenian mode of government. While, on one level, the abolition of slavery and the extension of full political rights to women, including access to the highest public offices, make modern democratic systems more egalitarian than that in ancient Athens, the direct involvement of ordinary citizens in day-to-day administration can be regarded as a more wholesome, less compromised version of popular sovereignty. Both systems, however, present considerable flaws; paradoxically, their practical mechanisms pervert the simple promise of equality from which they derive their legitimacy. Representative democracy, specifically, with the restriction of the people's participation in politics to general and local elections, clearly lends itself to distortions of what should be, by etymological definition, the rule of the people.

One of the central concerns of this book is the confusion generated by misleading mythologies that construct democracy in Athens as the 'origin' and model for contemporary practices. On several occasions, I have chosen to place the term democracy between inverted commas to signal that it is being used generically and confusingly, often with the aim of legitimizing the current hegemonic understanding of democracy, that is, liberal representative democracy, through the use of misrepresentations that idealize 'democratic' Athens and its theatre festivals. Therefore, I sometimes refer to Athenian democracy and liberal democracy as historical practices, but I primarily discuss the myth of 'democratic' Athens as a discourse that

20 This is a slow and non-linear process, the beginning of which roughly coincides with the period known as Enlightenment.

de-historicizes and distorts the relationship between language and its referent. The mythologizing mechanism is twofold: on the one hand, there is the confusion instilled by the idealization of fifth-century BC Athens as the Golden Age of unadulterated popular sovereignty; on the other, there is the demagogic pretence that, in deriving from Athenian forms, contemporary liberal democracy should be considered as legitimate and just as its 'classical' counterpart. Evidently, these mythologies aim to present the current order as the fairest possible system, but the growing number of protests held in the name of more radically 'democratic' forms of government, especially since the financial crisis of 2008, signals a dissatisfaction of the general public, not only in the West, with the paradox of the 'democratic' promise in the representative, liberal-conservative tradition. Protests have also highlighted discontent vis-à-vis the increasingly oppressive, authoritarian, neoliberal and military stance that Western democratic governments have adopted in recent decades, heralding what has been called a 'post-democratic' era.²¹ In using inverted commas, I therefore also acknowledge the discrepancy between the compromised practice of capitalist democracy and the radical ideal of 'people power' demagogically promised to the public but, as Jacques Rancière has noted, actually feared by the ruling classes and the markets.²² On the Left, the post-Marxist tradition has elaborated several propositions for a more consistently egalitarian system that would incorporate, rather than suppress, differences and antagonisms in its day-to-day processes; since 1985, Laclau and Mouffe's notion of radical democracy has been influential in this regard.²³ The proliferation of struggles in the name of democracy in recent years, from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement, offers new hope that the impoverished notion of democracy under the liberal tradition will one day be held accountable for its failures; precisely, for reproducing hierarchies and inequalities under the banner of social justice, and for limiting popular sovereignty to the right to opt for or

21 For a discussion of the notion of post-democracy, see Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

22 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

23 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

against pre-packaged programmes that are rarely accomplished by the end of a mandate. These struggles also provide some optimism that a renewed democratic impetus might make a fairer system thinkable and practicable. Theatre and performance, from the theatricality of street protests to that of professional stages, have an important role to play in this process. As Tony Fisher has argued in a recent article, the strategic aim of a radical democratic theatre should not be that of re-enacting an alleged 'original' theatre, as though the essence of theatre was 'democracy' itself, but that of practising 'arraignment of power' – that is, firstly, 'calling into question the multiple operations of power that constitute the determinate situation of subjection through which subjects are interpellated' by 'stag[ing] the encounter between subjects and the condition of their subjection'; and secondly, 'indict[ing] a determinate situation of subjection' by challenging the belief system upon which rest current power relations.²⁴ Exposing, challenging and resisting the proliferation of ahistorical mythologies about 'classical' Athens and its relationship to the contemporary Western world is, I suggest, one possible step in this direction.

Myth, Community and the Myth of Community

The notion of myth (or mythology) is key to the understanding of community. Every community has its own myths, which enable mechanisms of cultural identification and a degree of social cohesion to take place. The term myth can be used to refer to a kind of public-sphere discourse that is recurrent in a given society, and that often conceals and distorts reality for ideological purposes, usually reinforcing the status quo. For example, two of the contemporary Western myths at stake in the context of this discussion are the notions of freedom and democracy, in relation to which the West

24 Tony Fisher, 'Radical Democratic Theatre', *Performance Research*, 16.4 (2011), 15–26 (p. 12).

likes to define itself. Both Greek mythology and modern mythologies are narrative systems which produce, support and validate social customs and cultural beliefs. Roland Barthes defines myth as 'a type of speech' – that is, a 'mode of signification'.²⁵ More precisely, he sees it as a 'second-order semiological system', a metalanguage, because it rests on the system of the language-object (that is, either a spoken language or the language of painting, photography, advertising, film, theatre and so on).²⁶ Crucially, Barthes describes myth as 'de-politicized speech' which deforms meanings and deprives them of their historical dimension by naturalizing them.²⁷ For Barthes, myth is the process through which bourgeois ideology 'transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature', so that mythical discourses appear to be referring to 'natural' facts, not debatable values.²⁸ Barthes therefore notes that mythologies constitute a 'semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself to a factual system'.²⁹ This process of mythologization, effectively a loss of historicity, is one of the main concerns of this project.

Barthes's argument is echoed by Settis' thesis, already discussed above, that Western narratives of cyclical death and rebirth transform history into myth. According to both thinkers, myth empties reality of the material, cultural and historical conditions which enabled it, turning complex and contradictory processes into essences, universalisms and hierarchies ready to be consumed. Myth is thus an ideological device which 'interpellates' subjects and enables mechanisms of identification, in order to produce a certain image of reality and support a given power system.³⁰ By constructing

25 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. 109. Barthes uses the terms 'myth' (*mythe*) and 'mythology' (*mythologie*) as near synonyms, but 'myth' is more often used to refer to the ideological and discursive mechanism, while 'mythology' refers more specifically to an instance of mythical narrative.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 114–15.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 125. For the notion of interpellation, see Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, trans. B. Brewster and G. Lock (London: Verso, 1984), pp. 44–51.

imagined essences, mythologies support visions of identity as immanent, that is as having a fundamental principle in itself. The myth of community, for instance, has historically been associated with immanent conceptions of identity, as in the Nazi idea of race, or the nineteenth-century notion of nation. The issue with which this book is concerned is precisely the way in which mythologies around 'classical' Athens support identification with an imagined 'essence' of Europe. Of course, not every production of Greek tragedy perpetuates the European myth of 'origin', but these narratives cannot be simply dismissed, and theatre-makers should be aware of their effects.

Throughout my study, the works of Jean-Luc Nancy will provide a theoretical point of reference for articulating the relationship of myth to community. In his essay 'Myth Interrupted', Nancy argues that there is no community outside of myth; that is there is no 'being-in-common' without a story with which the community can identify itself as such.³¹ He evokes the image of the storyteller, around whom gather the members of a fraternity, as the foundational moment of community, the moment in which social identity is produced through performance:

It is an ancient, immemorial scene, and it does not take place just once, but repeats itself indefinitely, with regularity, at every gathering of the hordes, who come to learn of their tribal origins, of their origins in brotherhoods, in peoples, or in cities – gathered around fires burning everywhere in the mists of time. And we do not yet know if the fires are lit to warm the people, to keep away wild beasts, to cook food, or to light up the face of the narrator so that he can be seen as he speaks, sings or mimes the story (perhaps wearing a mask), or else to burn a sacrifice (perhaps with his own flesh) in honor of the ancestors, gods, beasts or men and women celebrated in the story.

The story often seems confused, it is not always coherent; it speaks of strange powers and numerous metamorphoses; it is also cruel, savage, and pitiless, but at times it also provokes laughter. It names things unknown, beings never seen. But those who have gathered together understand everything, in listening they understand themselves and the world, and they understand why it was necessary for them to come together, and why it was necessary that this be recounted to them.³²

31 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 57.

32 Ibid., p. 44.