REVIEW S


The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, based in the University of Oxford, was founded in 1996 under the co-direction of Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin, and this volume is substantially a collection of papers given at a conference in Oxford in July 1998 which had Medea as its subject, with additional chapters by Margaret Reynolds and Mae Smethurst. It is introduced by Fiona Macintosh, a co-editor of the volume with Hall and Taplin, and a Senior Research Fellow of the Archive by the time of publication, who concentrates on an outline of the 'rich theatrical traditions of Medea in France and Germany'. This is because the accent of the papers falls in the three subsequent chapters (from Diane Purkiss, Edith Hall and Macintosh herself) primarily on the English stage from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, while the following two chapters (from Marianne McDonald and Margaret Reynolds) are devoted, in distinct ways, to Medea in opera.

A further chapter (from Ian Christie) attends to Medea in film, and modern or contemporary surveys and analyses complete the volume, with attention to Greece (Platon Mavromoustakos), central Europe (Eva Stehlíková), the production(s) by Ninagawa (Mae Smethurst), and a production in Georgia (Olga Taxidou). The volume concludes with an index compiled by David Gowen, Researcher at the Archive, drawn from the database, and including details (year, place, author/composer, director where known and appropriate, and indications of genre or mode, such as adaptation). The index stretches from the mid-sixteenth century until the present.

One's general sense in reading the volume from the beginning to the end, rather than dipping in for reference, is initially that it carries the characteristics of an encyclopedia survey, but the particular studies in the second part, which relate to twentieth-century performance, obviously are highly selective. Purkiss wisely pursues the fashionable theme of absence in relation to the English Renaissance, since there is little other than allusion to work with here, and incidentally introduces the question of whether the volume is most interested in the continuities of the dramatic
Medea (of Euripides and Seneca) or in the theatricality of Medea (from other, non-dramatic classical sources, such as Ovid and Apollonius of Rhodes). As Gowan declares, albeit in one sentence (232), much of the content of his index, explicitly the information about productions, derives from research by individual members of the Archive (Hall, Taplin, Macintosh and Pantelis Michelakis), and Hall’s chapter on the eighteenth-century London stage provides brief profiles of particular plays, but also adds some components of a contextual study, notably on gender and ideology.

Macintosh maintains the ideological emphasis in tracing the curious history of the Victorian burlesque in relation to Medea, with its cross-dressing male actors (such as Frederick Robson) playing the role, and suggests a close connection in the issue of divorce in the middle of the century. With opera, and McDonald’s profiles of five operas over three and a half centuries, the emphasis changes to treatment and sourcing. Reynolds continues the profiling, but with a persistent interest in the critical theme of Medea performing herself, and the inter-relationship between Medea and the persona of Maria Callas.

With Theodorakis’ Medea (Macintosh) and with Callas (Reynolds) the twentieth century has already been broached, and Christie offers analyses of the films of Dessin, Pasolini (again Callas) and von Trier, provoking the question of what kind of ‘performance’ a film might be in contrast to theatre. Mavromoustakos gives a short, critical account of modern performances of Euripides’ tragedy in Greece, providing tempting insights into the history of modern Greek professional production, while Stehlíková penetrates the oppression of the communist bloc in eastern Europe with her sharp observations about the function of Medea for Czech performers and audiences in that era.

The volume concludes with two radically different accounts of specific productions, although Smethurst’s study of Ninagawa acknowledges the plurality of Ninagawa’s Medea in various revivals from 1978 to 1999. Taxidou writes as an author of an adaptation that was itself translated and performed in Georgia, while Smethurst is a critical outside eye for the performance of Ninagawa’s Medea in Tokyo in 1993, providing what the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz called a ‘thick description’ of the performance, by pointing to the skills and conventions
of *kabuki* and *bunraku* to which Ninagawa alluded, and alerting us to the disposition of the Japanese audience.

One of the questions that remains unanswered after reading the volume relates to the kind of research resources that the Archive offers to its potential users, since what we are reading here is more in the nature of the research that contributed to its composition. It might have been helpful, in what I suspect is a first volume of several, to have suggested the kinds of research that might be facilitated by the Archive, the kinds of support to researchers that the Archive can muster in relation to different eras, and to different research inquiries.

The volume also raises interesting questions about the description of plays and operas, which it incidentally presents in a variety of modes and choices, and about the distinction between attention to dramaturgy, to aspects to theatrical history and to performance. I noticed a tendency, intermittently but throughout the volume, to reify Medea, and to write as if Medea were a person who was ‘performing herself’, which sat rather uncomfortably with the more strictly ideological analyses of her mythical typology. In some respects, *Medea in Performance* proved to be a thematic rather than a performative study, and I would willingly have sacrificed some of the encyclopedic qualities in favour of a greater concentration on the problematic methodology (and resultant productivity) of more detailed performance studies. *Medea in Performance* makes a strong contribution to cultural studies, but for that reason its sphere of attention is both broader and more diffuse than its title might suggest on first inspection: it is an always admirable, but not at all times consistently purposeful book, a weakness it may be content to share with most collections of papers from conferences.

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