



## THEATRE AND POLITICS

CSAPO (E.), GOETTE (H. R.), GREEN (J. R.), LE GUEN (B.), PAILLARD (E.), STOOP (J.), WILSON (P.) (edd.) *Theatre and Autocracy in the Ancient World*. Pp. x+280, ills. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022. Cased, £82, €89.95, US\$103.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-079596-7.

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This volume sits within, and adds to, the substantial number of recent studies on theatre beyond Athens and the lively and pervasive presence of Greek drama, old and new, in theatres throughout the Hellenistic period and well into the time of the Roman empire.<sup>1</sup> It provides the first guide to the topic of autocracy (understood as the rule of one person) and theatre in antiquity. It is divided into three sections: the first two relate to Greek and Roman autocrats and theatre, and the third relates to how autocrats and oligarchs feature in the plays themselves.

The fact that it is the first volume on the topic begs a series of paradoxes, as argued in the introduction. To begin with, in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE autocratic states made up one third of the places with theatre culture; but classical autocrats were also largely responsible for the capillary and rapid spread of theatre in the ancient world (Csapo and Wilson). Autocratic rule ensured that Greek theatre culture thrived and expanded in the Hellenistic period and in Rome, especially after Octavian's victory at Actium (E. Bowie).

The volume contextually counters a series of long-held assumptions that have almost become undisputable facts in the scholarship surrounding ancient Greek drama (tragedy especially) over the last two generations. It provides strong evidence that there may be very little or no difference between drama developed within democratic forms of government and autocratic ones, notwithstanding Greek drama's historical inception in its democratic cradle, Athens.

As early as the fifth century Greek drama and theatre migrated to autocratic states. Beyond the famous case of Sicily (on which, see also K. Boshers's *Theatre Outside Athens* [2012]) and Macedon (Euripides and Agathon were invited to Archelaus' court at Aegae), we find two theatres in Cyrene (with a *skéné* perhaps dating to the first half of the century under the Battiad monarchy) and possibly some form of theatre culture in Thessaly (pp. 19–20). Drama and theatre festivals spread at incredibly high speed from the fourth century onwards: theatre was felt as the 'prime marker of Athenian culture', and as such it was used in Sicily, North Africa, Thessaly, Macedon, Caria, the Black Sea and Cyprus as a means to increase 'Greekness', whatever that might have meant in its different geographical contexts (p. 21).

But just as it helps deconstruct views of Greek drama as intrinsically democratic, a study on autocratic theatre in the ancient world also counters narratives of the onset of decline (both in quality and quantity) of the composition, performance and production

<sup>1</sup>K. Boshers (ed.), *Theatre Outside Athens: Drama in Greek Sicily and South Italy* (2012); E. Csapo and P. Wilson, 'Drama Outside Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC', *Trends in Classics* 7 (2015), pp. 316–95; C.W. Marshall and T. Hawkins (edd.), *Athenian Comedy in the Roman Empire* (2016); V. Liapis and A.K. Petrides, *Greek Tragedy after the Fifth Century: a Survey from ca. 400 BC to ca. AD 400* (2019); E. Csapo and P. Wilson, *A Social and Economic History of the Theatre to 300 BC. Volume II: Theatre beyond Athens* (2020).

of tragedy, comedy and satyr drama from the late fourth century BCE onwards, i.e. since the Greek cities' absorption into the Macedonian empire and the consequent disappearance of democracy.

Beyond the fact that most Greek cities were 'democratic' in the Hellenistic and the imperial eras (however much that was a cover-up for alternative, elite-based forms of power), theatre never stopped flourishing. P. Touyz's chapter on Hellenistic satyr play in fact argues for an intensification of its production and performance from the late fourth century through the Hellenistic era and into the Roman period. Satyr play does not disappear, but rather becomes a distinct genre in the Hellenistic period.

As for the performance of tragedy and comedy, old and new, there is evidence that it lived on at dramatic competitions until the second century CE (Csapo, Paillard and Wilson; Csapo and Wilson; Bowie); the strategic creation of festivals on the example of the Greek model under Augustus is further testament to Greek drama and theatre being central to Roman policy and propaganda (M.-H. Garelli; Paillard; M. Skotheim).

The importance of the theatre building as a permanent expression of power also made theatre particularly appealing to autocrats. C. de Lisle's chapter on Hieron II's 'building programme' is a testament to that. Theatre appeared as the 'centrepiece' (p. 60) of this programme, serving to reinforce the tyrant's power and ideology.

If, then, we may be inclined to see 'continuity' and certainly no substantial difference that may set autocratic and democratic drama apart, the chapters in the volume show how autocratic theatre is 'pragmatically different' (p. 14), i.e. they show how theatre took root, adapted and became integral to the life and culture of places with an autocratic form of government.

B. Le Guen, for example, speaks about the theatre guilds that formed shortly after the death of Alexander the Great, which responded to the need for theatre professionals, the so-called Associations of Artists of Dionysus, and how they were used by Hellenistic rulers. A potential threat to monarchic power, Le Guen demonstrates how the Associations were turned into an asset to strengthen the rule of the Ptolemies and absorbed within the 'political and religious objectives of the ruling dynasty' (p. 52).

Adaptation was key in the Roman world too: Paillard's chapter on public performances in Greek in Rome shows a significant shift between the republican and the imperial periods. If, during the Republic, performances in Greek were frowned upon and 'translation' was central to Rome's process of conquest and the building of its empire, once such power had been obtained and consolidated, emperors used performances in Greek to legitimise their political and military prowess by positioning themselves on an equal footing with (imperial) classical Athens, with its cultural and moral achievements, which theatre emblematically symbolised.

The increasing number of Greek agonistic festivals in the Roman imperial period from Augustus onwards further testifies to this: 500 agonistic festivals between the first century BCE and the third century CE, of which 50 comprised drama competitions. Skotheim demonstrates how Augustus' policy towards Greek theatre and festivals paved the way to making Greek theatre part of imperial policy: Augustus' re-founding of the *Actia* at Nicopolis (27 BCE) and the founding of the *Sebasta* in Naples (2 CE), as well as his material support for the creation of other festivals on the 'fringes of the empire' (p. 118), are important milestones in strengthening the link between Greek theatre (the 'marker of culture' par excellence) and Rome's imperialist politics. Goette's chapter on the commissioning and collecting of copies of portraits of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Menander from the late Republic to imperial times is yet another example of the high value placed on Greek drama and its authors as an indicator of elite culture.

The first and second centuries CE were also a period of innovation and renewal for theatre, as argued by Garelli, with the introduction of mimes and pantomimes into dramatic competitions in the second century CE (two genres particularly dear to autocrats) and of an imperial cult in which spectacles featured as important components of the propaganda surrounding it.

Theatre decorations and careful displays of power are especially evident in imperial Rome. Green presents a detailed study of the Antonine phase of the theatre of Paphos in Cyprus, focusing on the depiction of Antoninus and the portrait statues of the imperial family enclosing the theatre space.

The second section ends with a chapter by Bowie that, while reiterating the pervasiveness and lasting presence of a reperformance culture of old tragedy and comedy at competitions, speaks of the seemingly jarring fact that the content of some of these plays did not seem to intimidate emperors in the slightest, not even when the plot had the potential to stir up anti-imperial sentiments (Nero acted in *Antigone*, for example).

In the last section L. Athanassaki, S. Perris and R. Cowan discuss the content of tragedies and how they relate to and/or purport autocracy. Athanassaki's chapter on Euripides' portrayals of Theseus in a few of his tragedies shows that the tyrannicide and champion of democracy that was being celebrated on the Hephaesteion frieze (completed roughly at the same time as the production of the *Children of Heracles*) was challenged by the playwright's insistence on the hero's autocratic inclinations. Perris's focus is on oligarchic forms of government in tragedy: not only does he argue that these can be thought of as *the* local form of government in some tragedies; but, in a selection of fragments and (mostly Euripidean) whole tragedies, there emerges an idea of the rule of the few as preferable. Cowan's chapter focuses on Varius Rufus' *Thyestes* and its ties with the performance context it is believed to have been produced in: the Actian games of 29 BCE. His analysis is directed at reconciling the gruesome content of a tragedy about kin killing with its celebratory performative context.

This is a rich and exciting volume that will certainly become a reference point for those interested in theatre and autocracy. The book shows that autocratic rulers played a crucial role in the survival, spread and preservation of ancient Greek theatre and its repertoire.

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