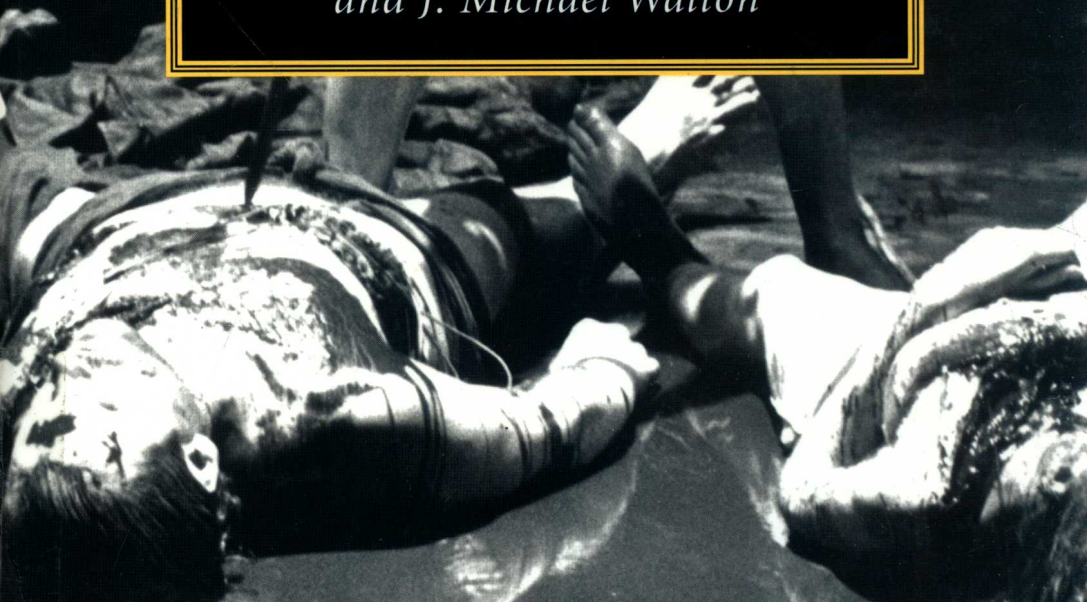


THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# GREEK AND ROMAN THEATRE

*Edited by Marianne McDonald  
and J. Michael Walton*



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## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Transliteration from ancient Greek into English is always imprecise, Greek having an alphabet of twenty-four letters, some of which have no single English equivalent. In Greek there is a 'k' (*kappa*), but no 'c'; there are long and short 'o's (*ômega* and *omicron*) and 'e's (*êta* and *epsilon*); as well as single letters for 'th' (*thêta*), 'ph' (*phi*), and 'ch' (*chi*), pronounced as in the Scottish 'loch'. There is no letter 'h' but the sound 'h' is represented by an aspirated 'breathing' mark on an initial vowel.

In the Companion the practice has been adopted of using what is most familiar to the general reader, while acknowledging that the mixture of anglicization and latinization may not always be consistent: hence 'Homer', 'Aeschylus', 'Aristotle', where many classical scholars would prefer 'Homêros', 'Aiskhylos', 'Aristotelês'.



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## INTRODUCTION

MARIANNE McDONALD AND J. MICHAEL WALTON

Most books on drama are about plays and playwrights. This is a book about theatre and, though the words 'drama' (from the Greek *drama*, 'something done') and 'theatre' (from *theatron*, 'a seeing-place' and *theama*, 'a show') both imply a performance dimension, it is the circumstances of presentation rather than the material that was presented that serve as its focus. Tragedy and comedy are part of a big-city art, their history defined for the most part by what happened in the capitals to which major artists have always tended to gravitate; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Marlowe from Canterbury, Shakespeare from Stratford, Beaumont from Leicestershire, Fletcher from Sussex and Wycherley from Shrewsbury, all naturally heading for London; Lully from Florence to Paris; Monteverdi from Cremona to Venice; modern American playwrights to New York or Los Angeles.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander were all Athenian bred, but of the Latin playwrights whose work has survived, Plautus was a native of Umbria, Terence born in Africa and Seneca in Spain. They all ended up living in Rome. Herodas, the writer of Greek 'mimes', a few of which have survived in written form, is the exception, living and working in Alexandria, but in the third century BC, when Herodas flourished, Alexandria was as much a cultural centre as was Athens or Rome.

The justification for this second Companion, following the earlier *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by Patricia Easterling (1997), is only in part that this new one looks at comedy as well as tragedy, the Roman world as well as the Greek. More important is an acknowledgment that, however much the surviving written playtexts became the foundation of the western repertoire, they form only one element of a broad theatrical tradition. The emphasis here is less on texts than on occasion, on the nature of a performance culture, on the religious thought underpinning every aspect of life from the rules of warfare to the governance and order of society; all of this reflected through the theatre of the times. This is the unifying theme for the first eight essays under the subheading 'Text in Context'.

Complementary is 'The Nature of Performance', eight further essays that look at the detail and organization of ancient performances, from playing-places to properties, costume to costs, ending with what happened to the theatrical repertoire when confronted with newer performance media. Running throughout the book is an awareness that, alongside the recorded and recordable history, there thrived a consistent but variable tradition of presentation: of storytelling, mockery and subversion; of dance, music and mask; of religious, secular and political expression; and, eventually, mechanical ingenuity, the arena and gladiatorial combat.

Much of this was so ingrained in society as to be barely noticed in its own time; some was of the humblest nature, entertainment that happened on street-corners or in tiny villages. It might be amateur or professional but was, for the most part, both and neither, being tied into communities of all sizes in which the sense of holiday or carnival found its expression and where those with some presentational skill might demonstrate it for anybody who turned up to watch or listen.

This, then, is a book that draws attention more to the circumstances of performance than to the substance of its most lasting monument, the classical plays. The nature of the occasion stands alongside the organization that sustained that occasion. The expectations of audiences are balanced against the motives of those who promoted them. There is very little on translation or on modern stage revival, except to enlighten the nature of the original experience and the difference that modern technology has imposed on performance and on historical research. However, attention may be drawn to the various translations in the Bibliography, most of which show an awareness of staging in introductions or through stage directions, including, in the case of Seneca, whether or not his plays were created with a staged performance in mind.

The biggest difficulty in deciding what should or should not be included was the sheer timescale involved. At a conservative estimate the history of ancient Greek and Roman theatre goes back a thousand years before Aeschylus was born, to the Minoan cultures of Crete and Thera. The further terminus, or at least a convenient staging post, is identified with the banning of all forms of theatrical performance in the late seventh century of the Christian era. Such is the range covered by **Mark Griffith** in his synoptic opening essay where he searches for the origins of tragedy and comedy, alongside recitation, dance and music, and traces their development through to Roman pantomime and beyond.

**Richard P. Martin** looks at the way in which a sense of 'theatre' was a persistent feature of so many aspects of Greek and Roman society, from sport to rhetoric, political systems to the *Ludi*, the Roman games where the

emperors consolidated power by giving the people the increasingly savage diversion they demanded. **Fritz Graf** investigates the relationship between mortals and immortals in polytheistic societies, and shows how religious observance formed a framework of dramatic presentation, with gods as characters in dramatic performance as they had been in the Homeric epics. **Jon Hesk** also makes comparisons between the theatres of Greece and Italy, investigating the social and political aspects of both, and the way in which civic responsibilities in Athens impinged on the stage world of Rome as well as of Athens. **David Wiles** revisits Aristotle to look anew at the intentions of the *Poetics*, the most influential document from classical times on the form of later tragedy.

While these five concentrate mainly on tragedy from Aeschylus to Seneca, Old Comedy in Athens is looked at in detail by **Gonda Van Steen**, who dissects the mixture of fantasy and real life in Aristophanes, identifying how some of the same production issues fed into revivals in the Athens of the twentieth century. **Sander Goldberg** picks up where Van Steen leaves off and investigates the nature of New Comedy; the similarities and differences between the work of the Greek playwright Menander and the Roman adapters of Greek Middle and New Comedy, Plautus and Terence. **Hugh Denard** completes the first section by showing how the centre of attention moved outside the cities to the vast range of miscellaneous 'popular' entertainment, virtually none of which survives in any scripted form, but which was a prominent feature of small-town and country life.

The second half opens with **Richard Green** assessing the place of theatre within a visual culture and evaluating the evidence of decoration and artefacts in deciphering what ancient performances might actually have looked like. **Rush Rehm** deciphers what is known about the conduct and organization of festivals and how they differed as a background for play production in Athens and Rome. **Richard Beacham** tackles theatre architecture, making a strong case for his reconstruction of the temporary theatres in wood which have not survived, as well as the magnificent stone monuments which can still be found in varying states of preservation throughout the Greek and Roman worlds. Choreographer and director **Yana Zarifi** reflects on the importance of dance and the significance of the Chorus in modes of presentation, from references within the Homeric epics, via Greek tragedy and comedy, to the Roman pantomime. **Gregory McCart's** essay follows naturally from here, investigating, again with a practitioner's perspective, the use of masks in ancient theatre and how, in an area that is much disputed, working with them today may throw light on ancient conventions. Stage mechanics and external effects, including costume, are scrutinized by **Graham Ley** in his chapter on the 'nuts and bolts' of ancient performance, where he notes how



many of those involved with the theatre process were ‘makers’ of some kind. **J. Michael Walton** looks at ‘commodity’, the questions of costs and management, patronage and sponsorship which lie behind any theatrical enterprise. The book concludes with **Marianne McDonald** elaborating on how performance priorities have been refined and redefined when a story from classical myth is dramatized in a new medium, opera, radio, television or film.

Many of these essays manage to cover a greater span of time than that between the birth of Christ and the date of this publication. The total period of more than two thousand years begins and ends in what used to be thought of as ‘dark ages’, but on which historians are shedding more and more light. With the best will in the world, confining two thousand years of social history within a single book is less like squeezing a quart into a pint pot than pouring a barrel into a thimble. The temptation is to impose a pattern where there is none, or to assume continuity or evolution amongst a mass of activity which is both geographically and historically pure accident. As untenable is to treat the theatre of fifth-century BC Athens as the golden age from which whatever happened in the next millennium was a decline. Though many a classicist might agree, the theatre historian cannot afford to be so judgemental.

One factor that makes the task both easier and more difficult is that ‘theatre’ under our broad definition is both under-recorded and underestimated. There was apparently a history of the theatre, probably the first such, written in Greek by King Juba of Mauritania some time during the reign of Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome. Unfortunately, like all the rest of Juba’s historical work, that book failed to survive. The study of the theatre of Greece and Italy has always been hampered, less by the small selection of surviving playtexts than by the fact that the circumstances of performance survive in haphazard fashion via a mixture of anecdote, reminiscence and incidental reference. The remains of many Roman and some Greek theatres are there to be seen and walked around; there are pictures on vases which appear to reflect theatrical performance; there are incidental comments from lawyers, architects, poets, grammarians and even scholiasts, those shadowy figures who at some time in the transmission of manuscripts added their own comments on what they thought was happening in a scene or how it was originally staged. There are precious few eyewitness accounts from the perspective of an audience member, still fewer from that of a player. There is one treatise on dance by Lucian (second century AD), but no ‘dances’; there is virtually no music, though music seems to be one of the few elements that links the performances from earliest Greece to latest Rome.

What we are left with is a vast amount of miscellaneous information, anything from the contradictory and implausible ‘Lives’ of the playwrights to unlikely anecdotes written up hundreds of years after the time they claim to