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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

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[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 'archetypical' 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

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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

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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, Socìetas 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 Socìetas 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

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7   For the concept of 'imagined political community', which informs my thinking in
     this area, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revized 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

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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 rec-
ognize 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 asso-
ciated with Greek tragedy, it is 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'participation'
that are constructed as timeless, simply the *sine qua non* of Western civili-
zation.[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 legiti-
mizing 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 con-
temporary 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'

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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 agen-
      das, 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-

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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 on 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. Coventionally, scholars credit Cleisthenes, an aristocratic leader of the city, with the 'invention' of what was then known as *isonomía* (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 *ekklesía*, 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 *ekklesía* 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

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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

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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

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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.

Nancy goes on to describe this scene as 'perhaps the essential scene of all scenes, of all scenography or all staging; it is perhaps the stage upon which we represent everything to ourselves'.[33] But while myth enables and produces community, it also unveils its deceit, because myths are misleading impostures: they are mere representations through which we understand the world. The scene of the storyteller is, therefore, itself mythic. Nancy warns, however, that the invention of myth is inextricable from power. Speaking of the mechanism on which the Nazi myth was based, he states:

> Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire pretension on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, to take away its secret, so that at last it can identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth. The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engender itself from them as the very destiny of humanity.[34]

With due mindfulness, Nancy's analysis can be usefully employed to understand the significance of performing ancient Greek drama for modern audiences. What is at stake in staging 'classical' Athenian tragedy is precisely what Nancy called the 'Idea of the West', the desire of the West to be perpetually regenerated through returning to its 'origins', understood as the universal 'destiny of humanity'. For centuries, the emergence of Greek tragedy in Athens has been conceptualized as the birth of Western theatre and associated to the original myth of Western civilization. Re-enacting this myth, re-appropriating its significance, immediately creates an idea of community – that is, a Western community, which can identify itself with the myth of its own 'origin'. Later in the same essay, Nancy suggests that the post-modern community constitutes itself on the basis of the absence of myth, which is itself a myth. Despite warning against nostalgia, Nancy nonetheless conceptualizes his time in terms of loss. He sees the early 1980s as a historical period where people no longer believe in myths, except for the 'myth of the absence of myth'.[35] Nancy expresses a nostalgic attitude

33   Ibid., pp. 44–45.
34   Ibid., p. 46.
35   Ibid., pp. 51–52 and 59. Nancy writes: 'It can therefore be said that romanticism, communism, and structuralism, through their secret but very precise community,

towards community when he says, 'What makes the absence of myth a myth is no longer, or not directly, in any case, its communitarian character. On the contrary, the mythic relation to the "absence of myth" is here presented, in appearance, as an individual relation.'[36] However, I would argue that what Nancy refers to as 'myth of the absence of myth' – the so-called collapse of ideologies that manifested itself towards end of the twentieth century – has not managed to put an end to the mechanism of myth, and certainly not to the dissemination of narratives of ancient Greece, especially regarding those Greek 'inventions', namely theatre and democracy.

In his essay 'The Inoperative Community', Nancy examines how the catastrophes of the twentieth century had been triggered by essentialist thinking applied to various types of community (nation, race, etc.) By referring to both Nazism and communism's attempts to achieve solid and homogeneous communities, he distinguishes between a community of identity (immanent) and a community of identifications (inoperative). He maintains that the aim of an immanent community, that is 'the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*', is typical of totalitarian societies and entails a conception of 'human essence' as absolute.[37] According to Nancy, such a 'working' community has never existed and is nothing but an imaginary conception. However, for centuries, since long before Rousseau's *Social Contract*, community has been thought of as a lost ideal to be reconstituted, encouraging a sense of nostalgia and yearning for an idealized pre-modern society compared with the 'harsh reality of modern experience'.[38] For Nancy, community is, on

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constitute the last tradition of myth. [...] But we know that we – our community, if it is one, our modern and postmodern humanity – have no relation to the myth of which we are speaking, even as we fulfill it or try to fulfill it. In a sense, for us all that remains of myth is its fulfillment or its will. We no longer live in mythic life, nor in a time of mythic invention or speech. When we speak of "myth" or of "mythology" we mean the negation of something at least as much as the negation of something'.

36   Ibid, p. 59.

37   Ibid., pp. 2–3.

38   Ibid., p. 10. For a critique of Western thinking about community, including of Rousseau, see Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

the contrary, 'nothing other than what undoes […] the autarchy of absolute immanence'; for him, the inoperative community can only produce an understanding of being itself as relational and plural.[39] Using Bataille's notion of ecstasy, Nancy conceptualizes community as the experience of the 'outside', of what constitutes the limit of human beings, namely mortality.[40] If community has not been lost, then loss must be thought of as constitutive of community, in so far as it is based on an 'interruption of self-consciousness', a shared mourning of the dead (or the ancestors, as incarnations of history) and a shared experience of death as somebody else's, never as our own.[41] As Ian James has argued, 'it is on the basis of the fact that our mortality or finitude is always already shared that something like community can exist in the first instance'.[42] Death and bereavement therefore enable community as a shared exposure of self-finitude experienced by singular beings, where the act of sharing is always problematic and incomplete.

Borrowing a key term from Guy Debord, Nancy expresses a conception of society as 'spectacular', in which the mechanisms of identifications that characterize the theatre also constitute our being-together. Nancy develops the idea of the plurality of being in his essay 'Of Being Singular Plural', where he describes existence as co-existence, being as being-together, always already a social and 'spectacular' experience. Nancy argues that the concept of 'we' can never signify a 'unique subject' but that it always 'expresses a plurality' and 'our being divided and entangled' at the same time. Being-with is the sharing of a simultaneous space-time that must be continuously redefined, as a 'we' implies the presentation of a here and now. A 'we' can only be such in a specific way, never in a general way: it is defined by 'people, culture, language, lineage, network, group, couple, band, and so on'. It is the 'we', therefore, that makes the 'I' possible, since 'no "I" can designate itself without there being a space-time of "self-referentiality" in general'. Consequently, for Nancy, every

39 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 6.
40 Ibid., pp. 14 and 19.
41 Ibid., p. 19.
42 Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 180.

time one articulates an 'I', one evokes performance, by positing a stage 'on which several [people] can say "I", each on his own account, each in turn'.[43] The group is 'a stage [that serves as] a place of identification' while 'the question of the "with" can never be expressed in terms of identity, but rather always in terms of identifications'.[44] But Nancy also warns against ideological exploitations of the notion of 'we'. This is why he insists on the fact that a process of dis-identification with any imposed 'we' is necessary. Today, for Nancy, the problem is not so much the project of totalitarianism as global capitalism, with its relentless myth-making machines, such as the media:

> We, 'we', how are we to say 'we'? Or rather, who is it that says 'we' and what are we told about ourselves in the technological proliferation of the social spectacle and the social as spectacular, as well as in the proliferation of the self-mediatized globalization and globalized mediatization? [...] We do not have to identify ourselves as 'we,' as a 'we'. Rather, we have to disidentify ourselves *from* every sort of 'we' that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this *insofar as* 'we' co-appear. Anterior to all thought, [...] the 'thought' of 'us' is not a representational thought [...]. It is, instead, a *praxis* and an *ethos*.[45]

Nancy's line of thought warns against attempts to manufacture exclusions and foster divisions between humans through essentialist self-representations. Crucially, Nancy examines the role that Greek theatre has acquired in Western society as the paradigm of Western self-representation, of a 'we' that is the subject of its own representation. He observes that the modern way of conceptualizing the foundations of the 'so-called Western tradition' includes three notions: philosophy, politics and theatre. Theatre, as 'the symbolic-imaginary appropriation of collective existence', appears to be the quintessential 'presentation of being-together' (and therefore, of community), but it is such only insofar as it implies the distance of

43   This and the preceding quotations are from Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 65.
44   Ibid., p. 66.
45   Ibid., pp. 70–71.

representation.[46] For Nancy, Western society still foregrounds presence as 'immanent and enclosed', while the logic of community would require representation as an act of sharing.[47] Nancy examines the fundamental 'unpresentability of social Being' which, in his view, Western society has not yet begun to accept. He concludes that 'the incommensurability of Being as being-with-one-another' must warn against desires to identify with the Greeks.[48] According to Nancy, 'we' should therefore stop imagining that 'we' are Greeks, by finally seeing ourselves as 'moderns' and realizing that 'we', our being-together, is unpresentable.

In commenting on the ways in which social and individual identities are constructed through mechanisms of self-representation and identification, Nancy's argument has considerable implications for the theatre. Above all, I believe, Nancy urges caution and vigilance with regard to uses of the 'classical' that unproblematically offer themselves to their audiences as self-representations, saying: 'this is where we, the people of Europe, come from; this is who we are'. While I do not see Nancy's reasoning as discouraging contemporary performances of Greek tragedies per se, I regard it as a warning against essentializing mythologies about community and identity that are so often uncritically attached to revivals and adaptations of 'classical' theatre.

Questions of Nationality, Transnationality and Postnationality

The myth of community, as articulated through 'classical' Athens in Western capitalist democracies, undeniably operates in conjunction with ideas about nation, albeit transcending the political and geographical boundaries of modern nation-states. Benedict Anderson's influential study *Imagined*

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46   For this and the preceding quotations, ibid., p. 71.
47   Ibid., p. 72.
48   Ibid., p. 73.

Communities defines the concept of nation as an 'imagined political community – and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign' and traces its emergence out of, and in opposition to, the disintegration of large cultural systems that preceded it, namely the religious community and the dynastic realm.[49] The rise of nationalism, Anderson argues, was enabled by the synergy of printing technologies and capitalism, an alliance which he terms 'print-capitalism', and the subsequent development of vernacular languages, which gradually overturned Latin and became official and administrative languages-of-power in their own right.[50] According to Anderson, then, capitalism produced nation as a political and cultural category and turned it into one of the most influential paradigms for conceptualizing community and identity. Despite recent challenges, the idea of nation retains a central role in the production of subjectivity.

In recent years, however, many scholars, including Zygmunt Bauman and Jürgen Habermas, have noted that the ideological model of the nation-state is in decline. Bauman has argued that since the nation-state's conception of identity as '"natural", predetermined and non-negotiable' is no longer operative, individuals are 'desperately seeking a "we"' and look to narratives of belonging, other than nation, to underpin their identity-making process.[51] As the 'global communities' of the twenty-first century look beyond national boundaries, transnational myths like 'classical' Greece become entangled with the process of cultural globalization, which might point to a future in which the nation-state loses its political dominance. However, because it is based on such notions as 'origin', the myth of 'classical' Greece still perpetuates ideas of 'natural' belonging as a model for identity construction, inevitably resting on the paradigm established by the nation-state. This would lead us to think that, in fact, the model of the nation-state is not in decline, but is transitioning into a new, more complex phase. For Habermas, however, we live in a 'postnational world'. In his 2006

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49   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 6 and 12.
50   Ibid., see especially pp. 37–46.
51   Zygmunt Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 24.

collection of interviews and essays *The Divided West*, Habermas provides a critical analysis of the project of the European Union and its relationship to the United States. In his view, the problem of European identity is not whether such a thing exists or not, but whether European peoples will be able to develop a 'shared political opinion- and will-formation [...] above the national level'.[52] Habermas believes that Europe will not be able to be an active player in the global arena unless it manages to build a 'transnational public space' and a 'political civic identity' that is not 'controlled from above'.[53]

In speculating on the unfinished process of building a 'consciousness of common political fate', he points out that the 'no demos thesis' – namely, that there is no single 'European subject', and therefore that there cannot be any further integration among European peoples – is rooted in the nineteenth-century conception of the nation-state.[54] He believes that the current underdevelopment of a shared European identity is irrelevant to the actual possibility of a strong European unification project. Since the fictional construct of national history and mechanisms of identification with the nation-state required 'almost a century' to become engrained in people's consciousness, Habermas implies that any process of gradual identification with European institutions might take just as long.[55] Describing the route from a national to a postnational consciousness, he sees the new 'orientation to the constitution' as an important step towards a shared European project.[56] An outspoken supporter of the Kantian project of cosmopolitan citizenship, Habermas argued that the European Union's transnational form of government 'could serve as an example to be emulated in the postnational constellation'.[57] Habermas' idea of the end of nation and the beginning of a postnational age might be seen to clash with signs that

52   Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 81.
53   Ibid., p. 82.
54   Ibid., p. 76.
55   Ibid., p. 77.
56   Ibid., p. 78.
57   Ibid., p. 43.

narratives concerning 'origin' are still strongly operative in public-sphere discourses, but what is relevant about his argument is his suggestion that European citizens need to concentrate on building a common European consciousness. Amid the surge of Euroscepticism following the drafting of the European Constitution, Habermas asks: 'are there historical experiences, traditions, and achievements capable of fostering among European citizens the sense of a shared political fate that they can *shape in common*?'[58] Habermas' response to this fundamental question is based on his historical analysis of the 'post-war European mentality' and initiates a move he calls 'hermeneutics of processes of self-understanding'.[59] In his view, shared features of the European mind set, which he sees rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are the secularization of politics, diffidence towards the market, recognition of the contradictions of progress, scepticism towards technology, support for social welfare, rejection of state violence and a commitment to peace.[60] Although these characteristics might seem to form Habermas' wish list more than a real description of the alleged 'European mentality', what is crucial here is that there is no mention of the 'classical' Greco-Roman tradition in his account. For Habermas, the Old and New Testaments, not the Greek 'classics', have made Europeans what they are.

Contrary to Habermas' thesis on postnationality, Étienne Balibar rejects the assumption that recent historical developments have heralded the so-called end of nations. In his essay '*Homo Nationalis*: An Anthropological Sketch of the Nation-Form', Balibar argues that the phrase 'end of nations' actually reiterates the idea of 'origin', be it the origin of empires, civilizations, religions, cultures, or 'the origin of the world'.[61] In Balibar's view, the discourse of the end of nations reinstates in a negative form the discourse of the 'origin' of nations, reinforcing the idea that nations have a birthplace and that they retain an invariable relationship with it. Specifically,

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58   Ibid., italics in the original.
59   Ibid., p. 46.
60   Ibid., pp. 46–48.
61   Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 15.

Balibar sees this discourse as geographically situated in the 'North' and addressed to the 'South' of the world, effectively dissuading developing nations from nurturing programmes of national independence, thus promoting ambiguous notions of universalism and cosmopolitanism.[62] In other words, Balibar sees this discourse as an ideological device aimed at maintaining international hegemony and current power relations. Whether a hypothetical postnational era is seen as a positive or a negative outcome, Balibar reminds us that the discourse of the end of nations is an 'inversion [...] of the discourse individuals and groups carry on about their original identity and the (supposed) origins of their identity'.[63] He asks how it is possible to believe in the end of nations when the regulation and bureaucracy of national borders and the continued efforts to restrict the circulation of people across national boundaries – in other words, attempts to reaffirm the nation – are on the daily political agenda in the contemporary world. However, as Balibar points out, the positions of those who welcome an alleged postnational era are rooted in a complex array of ideological positions, such as neo-liberalism, globalization, international human rights, and environmentalism; this ambiguity prevents any categorical classification of the postnational discourse as merely conservative.[64]

Balibar distinguishes between the notion of 'transnational citizenship' and that of 'supranational' or 'postnational' citizenship.[65] He suggests that the process of European unification has brought about an idea of citizenship that is separate from nationhood, but notes that this constitutes 'neither a reproduction of the same "constitution of citizenship" [...] at a *supranational* level [...] nor a dissolution or the notions of "community" and "people" in a *postnational* "cosmopolitical society"'.[66] Balibar's argument on the transnationalization of the political sphere in Europe is significant in that it provides a framework for conceptualizing how mythologies around 'classical' Greece reaffirm the discourse of 'origin' in a context where citizenship

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62   Ibid., pp. 14–15.
63   Ibid., pp. 14–16.
64   Ibid., p. 13.
65   Ibid., p. viii.
66   Ibid., italics in the original.

and nationhood are divorced from each other. As a transnational European myth, 'classical' Athens provides a narrative of cultural belonging alongside the myth of nation, while at the same time borrowing the essentialist mechanisms through which nationhood is constructed. Precisely when the European political project is seeking legitimization, the myth of 'origin' offers a platform for the construction of a transnational European narrative of belonging. What is relevant is that these mythologies work across regions, proposing that theatre audiences recognize themselves in 'classical' Athens, not on nationalist but on transnational grounds. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, 'we' recognize ourselves in these myths not because they make us more British, Italian, German, French or Spanish, but because they are imagined as constituting the foundations of European civilization. Interpellating the 'democratic' European self, these mythologies transform recent conflictual histories into common grounds and shared destinies.

For the purpose of this book, I will concentrate my analysis on productions performed in Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Greece. Although these local contexts do not make for a unified scene, today the international circulation of mainstream theatre in Europe, particularly across Western Europe, and the material circumstances which enable certain productions to secure enough funding, make it increasingly difficult to link productions to specific localities. Transnational projects casting performers of mixed nationalities and designed to go on tour to the various international institutions that have invested in the production are more and more common. Examples of such projects include Thierry Salmon's *Les Troyennes* (1988), Peter Stein's *Penthesilea* (2002) and the European Theatre Company's *Le Troiane* (2008).[67] In addition, extra-European 'celeb-

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67   Thierry Salmon's *Le Troyennes* was produced by French, Italian, German and Spanish
      partners. It premiered at the Orestiadi Festival of Gibellina in Sicily before going on
      a European tour to Belgium and Spain. Peter Stein's *Penthesilea*, produced with an
      Italian, Austrian, Spanish and Greek cast by production partners from the same coun-
      tries, opened at the ancient amphitheatre in Epidaurus and went on tour to Italy and
      Spain. The European Theatre Company's *Le Troiane* was directed by Annalisa Bianco
      and Virginio Liberti with an international cast in collaboration with Portuguese,

rity' practitioners such as Robert Wilson and Peter Sellars have become so firmly associated with the theatre system in Europe that including their work within a commentary on performance in the region seems legitimate. The transnational economies of international festivals and the European-wide networks of State-funded theatres form an established part of a system that is increasingly unable and unwilling to define internal boundaries.[68] However, questions must be asked about the elitist mechanisms enabling the emergence of touring companies and productions, which by no means represent the entire ecology of theatre practices in Europe. Despite Western Europe's cultural and economic hegemony over 'new' European realities, processes of European transnationalization are marked by strong regional differences and heterogeneous histories. Significantly, however, it is through Western Europe's economic and political hegemony that the ideological mechanisms of the 'classical' are appropriated as pan-European. Unsurprisingly, Europe's leading economies and founding members of the European Union – Germany, France and Italy – boast the strongest scholarly traditions of Classical Studies in the continent.[69]

French, Belgian, Spanish and Italian partners. It opened at the Napoli Teatro Festival and toured Italy, Spain, France, Belgium and Portugal.

68 Lev Dodin, Wajdi Mouawad and William Kentridge have also repeatedly performed in European venues and festivals. For a study of internationalism on the Parisian stage, see David Bradby and Maria M. Delgado, eds, *The Paris Jigsaw: Internationalism and the City's Stages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). See also Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, 'Introduction', in Delgado and Rebellato, eds, *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–28.

69 While uses of the 'classical' appear to be more widespread in Western continental Europe, Poland and Ireland have emerged as particularly favourable contexts for the appropriation of Greek tragedy. This could be linked to a desire to shift national identity away from British, Russian or Soviet myths. For a study of adaptations of Greek tragedy in Ireland, see Marianne McDonald, and J. Michael Walton, *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 2002); for for a study of contemporary Polish theatre, see Paul Allain, ed., 'Polish Theatre After 1989: Beyond Borders', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 15.1 (2005); on Jarzyna's and Warlikowski's adaptations of the 'classics', see Jacek Kopciński, 'Director's Solos: Grzegorz Jarzyna and Krzysztof Warlikowski', in ibid., 82–92.

Already in 1825, Hegel could emphatically declare that 'the name of Greece strikes home to the hearts of men of education in Europe'.[70] But while this narrative emerged among the cultural elite, it only became popularized during the second half of the twentieth century, when divisions between high and low culture became increasingly blurred.

In 2003, the myth that Europe was born in 'democratic' Athens was almost officially endorsed by the European Parliament when the Preamble to the draft European Constitution included a manipulated quotation from the Greek historian Thucydides, in which the fifth-century Athenian politician Pericles defines the specificity of the Athenian political system: 'Our constitution ... is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole of the people.'[71] The fact that the quotation was removed in the final draft does not diminish the pervasiveness of discourses that seek to legitimize a political system through its half-mythical, half-historical 'origin'. Despite having permeated political discourses, these narratives are not, however, consistently imposed from above; they do not form a rational project undertaken by a consistent movement, nor are they mere propagandist gesture. But they do permeate all levels of society and are perpetuated by individuals and single works of art as much as by cultural institutions and the media. As a dominant cultural myth, 'democratic' Athens hails individuals who are produced by it and who in turn disseminate it in various ways, including, and perhaps most specifically, in the theatre. While performance remains a working site for negotiating

70   Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E. S. Haldane, 3 vols (Lincoln, NE; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), I, p. 149.

71   See Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: History of an Ideology* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), pp. 7–20 (pp. 7–8). A more appropriate translation of the words Thucydides attributes to Pericles would be, according to Canfora: 'The word we use to describe our political system [...] is *democracy* because, in its administration [...], it relates not to the few but to the majority.' In the original Greek, neither 'power' nor 'the whole of the people' are mentioned. See Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book II, ch. VI, par. 37.

our being-in-common, the principal challenge for those theatre-makers wishing to confront Greek tragedy is: how might it be possible to present it as other, or simultaneously familiar and foreign? How can performance acknowledge and subvert these mythologies?

A New 'Wave' of Greek Tragedies?

Part of my argument rests on the fact that a sizeable proportion of Europeans today happen to live within easy reach of a performance of a Greek tragedy at least once every theatre season. How many of them actually attend those performances is another matter. Translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy make for a significant part of theatre repertoires and international festival programmes both in state-funded and in experimental venues, suggesting that Greek tragedy still manages to attract large audiences. It would prove difficult to accurately demonstrate in the space of a single volume that the number of Greek plays staged in Europe has been increasing since the second half of the twentieth century. In order to prove an intensification of the interest in Greek theatre, one would have to take into account the overall number of performances produced in a given period and then measure whether the proportion of Greek adaptations in relation to the entire number of productions had actually increased. However, it seems relevant to at least provide some form of evidence for the popularity of Greek tragedy. In her introduction to the volume *Dionysus since 69*, Edith Hall argues that more Greek tragedies (both translations and adaptations) were performed in the last three decades of the twentieth century 'than at any other point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity'.[72] She notes that a large number of new productions of Greek tragedies for commercial

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[72]   Edith Hall, 'Introduction', in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, eds, *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–46 (p. 2).