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Hadrian's Wall, 1850–1950: Frontier and Monument

Abstract This paper discusses the place of Hadrian's Wall in British intellectual life between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, and charts its development through three key phases: the new season of archaeological and antiquarian research spearheaded by John Collingwood Bruce; the ground-breaking methodological reflections of Francis Haverfield and R. G. Collingwood; and the debates on the Wall as an ancient and modern frontier, from Rudyard Kipling to Winston Churchill and W. H. Auden. The Appendix reproduces an important 1921 paper by R. G. Collingwood that is virtually inaccessible outside the United Kingdom.

Keywords Hadrian's Wall; Roman Empire; frontiers; British Empire; Roman Britain

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1. A VICTORIAN REDISCOVERY

The wall that used to run across Northern England for 74 miles, from Bowness to Wallsend, came to be firmly recognised as Hadrian's Wall only in the mid-nineteenth century. The presence of a Roman wall in those parts had of course long been acknowledged and had been the object of careful and often passionate study for centuries. For generations, though, the Wall had been regarded as either from a later phase of Roman imperial history – typically the Severan period – or even as non-Roman at all: in the 1570s the local antiquarian Christopher Ridley claimed that it had been built by the Picts, the native population that engaged in a longstanding resistance against the Roman invasion.[1] Far from being a mark of Rome's civilising mission, it was a token of enduring alterity. Throughout the early modern period the Wall was often referred to as the "Picts' Wall". From the second quarter of the eighteenth century, though, it was customarily called the "Roman Wall", and in the nineteenth century new methods of investigation and a new body of evidence decisively steered the consensus towards a dating at the end of the first quarter of the second century CE.[2]

From the early Victorian age, the Wall was associated with a turning point in the Roman conquest of Britain, and with a specific phase in the history of the Roman Empire. Engagement with it in this period was marked by at least three original features, which have been identified in a number of later studies, most notably in Richard Hingley's 2012 book on the "life" of the Wall.[3] Firstly, the leading role in the study of the Wall was not played by university professors, but by a cohort of scholars who brought to the topic a robust antiquarian training, and operated within the context of local learned society, especially in North East England. Secondly, the Wall rarely featured in the political debate of the time: a search through the Hansard – the transcripts of parliamentary debates at Westminster – shows that reference to it is hardly ever made in the context of political arguments, and that the focus of the attention is on its preservation and the promotion of its legacy. As we shall see in some detail, though, references to the Wall in literature and popular culture are often politically charged. Thirdly,

1 Birley (1961), 2–4.

2 On the distinction between *murus* and *vallum,* and that between 'wall' and 'ditch' in this context, see Collingwood 1930, 69 n. 1. https://archive.org/details/archaeologyofrom oooorgco/page/68/mode/2up

3 Hingley (2012), 177–253. See also Hingley (2008), 85–155.

the Wall is a boundary for which no direct geopolitical or strategic significance can be invoked in modern times: the historical significance that it had in antiquity, though, is made to yield lessons that retain considerable contemporary value. In the background there are of course three wider problems: the continuity between Britannia and Britain; the complex analogies between Roman and British Empire, and, further in the background, the relationship between England and Scotland.

As R. G. Collingwood argued in a classic paper to which we shall return, Hadrian's Wall is not just a monument, or a topic: it is a problem, and one whose methodological implications are as considerable as the substantive ones. Figuring out *how* to study the Wall is just as significant as coming up with a credible reconstruction of its chronology and its archaeology. The work of the founding figure of the modern study of the Wall, John Collingwood Bruce (1805–1892), articulates this fundamental interdependence. His 1851 book, *The Roman Wall,* opens with an evocation of the wall as a boundary: "The Roman Wall, which, in former times, protected southern Britain from the ravages of the northern tribes, exhibits, at this day, remains more entire, and forms a subject of study more interesting than is generally supposed".[4] Bruce's treatment is based on thorough familiarity with the material remains of the wall, and asserts their significance in strongly assured terms: Britain is the country in which the traces of the presence of the Roman army are most prominent, and its unique bond with Rome is embodied by the Wall: "As this work, in grandeur of conception, is worthy of the Mistress of Nations, so, in durability of structure, is it the becoming offspring of the Eternal City".[5] The continuity is profound, but imperfect. Hadrian is confidently identified as the author of the wall and as a great military leader, but not even his intervention resolved the long-standing threat posed by the northern populations: the history of the Roman presence in northern England is in fact "fraught with disaster"; the problem was a long-term one, though, and not resolved until the reign of Elizabeth I. Not even Roman military discipline and the moral instruction conferred by the liberal arts could equip the Britons with the skill and resolve to stand up to the attacks of the Picts and the Scots. The Wall was there to be maintained as a barrier, and its demise is a development worthy

4 Bruce (1851), v.

5 Bruce (1851), 1. On this passage see Hingley (2008), 309–310. For a recent biographical profile of Collingwood, based on a survey of his surviving portraits, see Lovell Stewart-Breeze-Wilson (2024). See also Breeze (2024), 8–17.

of investigation, especially from the standpoint of imperial Britain. The question whether the fate of Persia, Macedon, and Rome might befall upon it remains open, although the new empire can rely on the guidance of the Bible, and thus save itself from the same vicious cycle.

Bruce had trained as a Presbyterian minister, and such a providential take on history is not altogether surprising. Nor was such a keen religious outlook a hurdle to his curiosity: far from it, it appeared to give it further vigour. In June 1849, as he was working on his book, he organised a walk along the Wall that was to become the first instalment of an honourable tradition which continues to this day: significantly, it was called the Hadrian's Wall Pilgrimage.[6] It was a local event, but it was going to have considerable implications for the later history of scholarship on the Wall, and was rather fundamentally connected to the recent developments on the big stage of European political history: in the summer of the previous year Bruce had planned a trip to Rome, but (in the words of his son Gainsford) "was prevented by the revolutions which convulsed nearly the whole of Europe at the time, and therefore he resolved to study the Roman remains in the north of England".[7] When the group of the pilgrims visited Housesteads, Bruce was asked to give a talk on the mysteries of Mithras ("This I did as well as I could"); in his address he also commented on the "downtrodden state" of Britain at the time when the site was built, and added that things had changed comprehensively: Queen Victoria ruled over "regions Caesar never knew", and over four times the number of subjects that "great Julius" used to govern.[8] The Pilgrimage involved about twenty participants, but various "gentry" from Newcastle and from the centres near the Wall joined it at various points. It was Bruce's stated ambition to elicit respect towards it among the inhabitants of the region, which had often used it as a quarry, by showing that "gentlemen of education and cultivated ladies" were taking an interest in it. Class boundaries, as ever in English history, come into the equation.

6 On which see Breeze (2020). – On the logistics of study trips on the Wall in the 1930s see Anonymous (1932); Bridge (1932); Garnons Williams (1935), 130–131. By the start of the century the Wall had gained a place of some significance in English travel literature: see Hoyer (1908) and Weigall (1926).

7 Bruce (1905), 110.

8 Bruce (1905), 121.

2. CANONISING THE WALL: BRUCE'S SCHOLARLY LEGACY

Bruce's work readily gained attention and credibility. His argument on the chronology of the Wall, which attributed to Hadrian both the construction of the wall and the earthen rampart along it, was accepted by Thomas Wright (1810–1877) in his large-scale account of British history *The Celt, the Roman and the Saxon* (1852), where the project was explained in light of a wider "system of circumvallation" that Hadrian set up for the northern frontier of the Empire; later history is used to stress how valuable the creation of a barrier against "the ravages of the Scots" could be.[9] On this account, the Wall fulfilled its defensive mission down to the end. Even after the end of Roman rule, in the fifth century, the Picts did not invade the former province by climbing the wall, but through the Solway Firth, having joined forces with the Irish (386). This is not the only instance in which the theme of an alliance between the Scots and the Irish was invoked, as we shall see. Charles Merivale (1808–1893), the distinguished author of *A History of the Romans under the Empire,* also had some positive comments on Bruce's contribution in the eighth and final volume of his great work (1865). Even though he was unpersuaded by the Hadrianic dating, and was rather inclined to date "the stupendous wall of solid masonry" to the age of Theodosius and Stilicho, he still credited Hadrian with the decision to draw the northern frontier of the province between the Solway and the Tyne, thus creating an effective barrier against the Caledonians. But there was more: in the archaeology of that small portion of territory one can "read an epitome" of the history of the Roman Empire (210); at the same time, in the Antonine period the area north of the Wall also got "filled with monuments of southern civilization", and the expansion of the boundaries of the empire was partly driven by the provincial themselves, who were keen to escape the direct control of provincial government ("the pressure of their local burdens"), but also wanted to keep enjoying its protection. Like Bruce, Merivale granted the archaeology of Roman Britain a special role in the understanding of the Roman world, and played on the stimulating paradox that the fringes of the empire represent its deepest spirit.

Merivale was also keen to stress the ethnic diversity of the imperial operation, and vividly portrayed the range of populations that defended the frontier against the Caledonians. The same idea features – quite independently – in a mural that in 1857 the Pre-Raphaelite Scottish artist William Bell Scott (1811–1890) placed

9 Wright (1852), 99–100.

at the start of a cycle of eight paintings on the history of Northumberland, in the Central Hall of Wallington, a stately home then owned by the Trevelyans. The scene has a somewhat incongruous touch to it: the wall is being built under the watch of a centurion that proudly stands by the SPQR standard, while some Roman soldiers are busy seeing off an attack from the north. Some of its features, though, are highly consequential. One of the Roman soldiers, prominently placed right at the front of the defence line, with an enemy arrow in his shield, is a black man, in a studied nod at the multiethnic dimension of the empire.[10] The centurion at the forefront, sternly looking at what appears to be a family of Britons that are failing to pull their weight in the wall-building project, has the features of John Clayton (1792–1890), the Town Clerk of Newcastle upon Tyne who played a crucial role in safeguarding stretches of the Wall and overseeing their restoration, and to whom Bruce's 1851 book is dedicated; the workman right behind him, keenly scanning the horizon, is none other than Bruce himself. The painting has an avowedly local dimension, as it is intended to depict the opening act of civilisation in the North East. The key trait it shares with the seven other paintings of the cycle is its connection with labour and technology; the red-lettered inscription that tops it unequivocally summarises the importance of the event to Scott and his commissioners, slightly paraphrasing a passage of the *Historia Augusta* (*Hadr.* 11.2): *Adrianus murum duxit qui barbaros Romanosque divideret*. Significantly, a clear line of continuity is posited between ancient and modern: the construction of the Wall is identified as a defining moment in the history of Northumberland and, more broadly, of Britain itself.[11] **(Figure 1)**

The Wallington mural is the exceptional manifestation of a process that unfolded well beyond the sheltered confines of a stately home, and was definitely not restricted to the aristocracy. The second half of the nineteenth century is the moment in which the Roman Wall became an established feature of the landscape of Northern England, and the prospect of walking along it and getting to know it in any detail turned into a realistic one; the challenge of its protection was intrinsically linked to the wider challenge of managing the change that the industrial revolution was bringing about. Some learned societies played a central role in disseminating such knowledge and awareness. In Northern England, the Society of Antiquaries and the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle, and the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological

10 For a careful reading of this painting see Symonds (2021), 158–160.

11 See Figure 1.

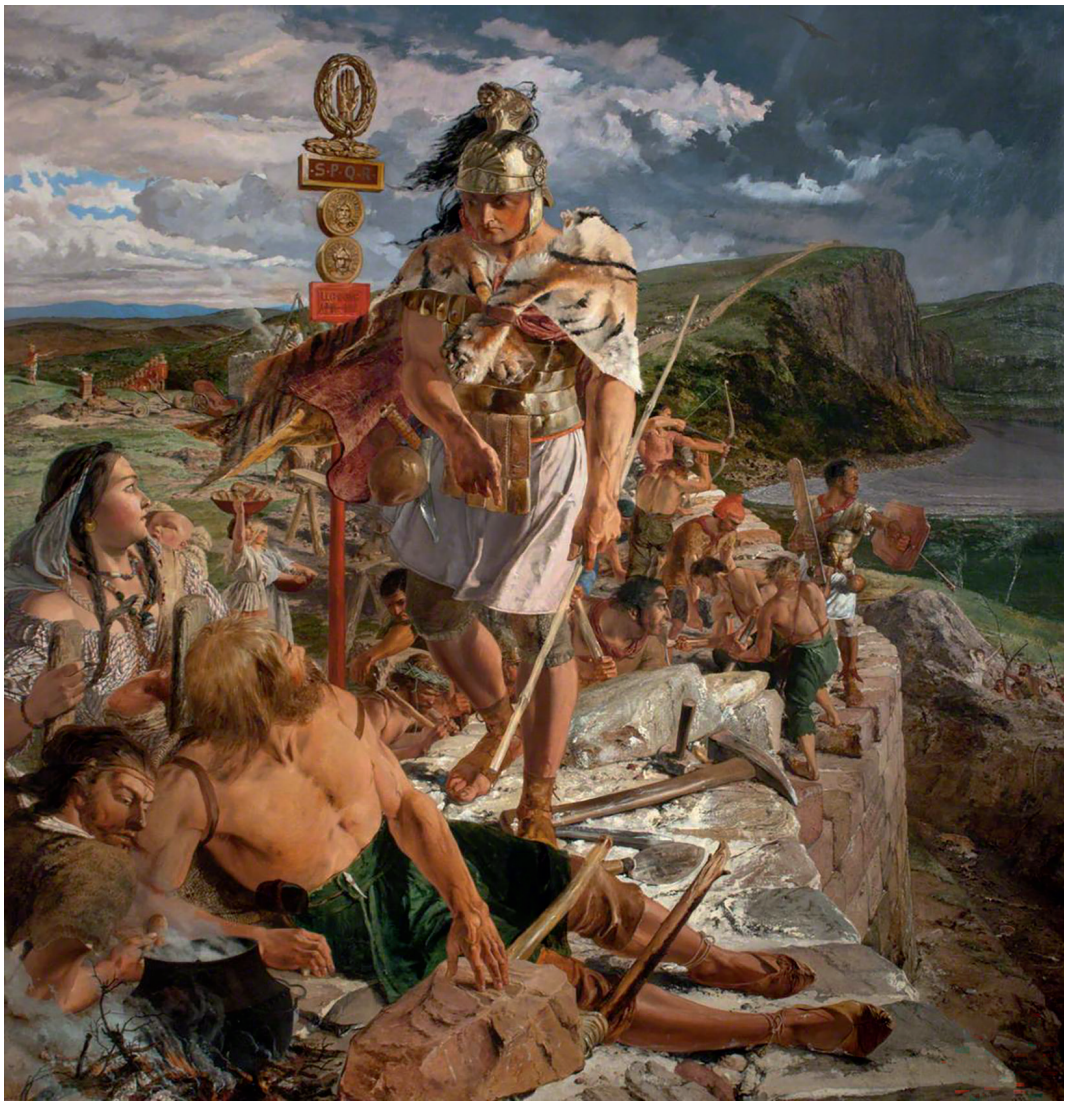

Figure 1 William Bell Scott, *The Romans Cause a Wall to Be Built for the Protection of the South*, 1857, Wallington Hall, Northumberland. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clayton_painting.jpg

Association (founded in 1866); on the national stage, the Society of Antiquaries of London. Bruce was the central figure in this season, and it was befitting that in 1886, when the Second Pilgrimage was jointly organised by the Newcastle and Cumberland Societies, he should be appointed "chief pilgrim and expounder general": he was eighty at the time.[12] In the speech he gave at the start of the Pilgrimage he restated the analogy between Rome and Britain, and the need "to avoid those faults, those sins which have laid this mighty people in the dust".[13]

The party included E. C. Clark, Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge, and the Dutch archaeologist Gerrit A. Hulsebos from Utrecht: the Wall had by then established itself as a topic whose attraction well exceeded its local remit. In the previous year, in *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian,* Theodor Mommsen had defined it the best known of Roman military works:[14] his assessment was both a reflection of the importance of the material and of the quality of the work that had been done on it. It was also the symptom, though, of an emerging interest in the Roman frontier in other provincial contexts, notably in Germany. That work would soon lead to a radical rescoping of the investigations carried out in Northern England. It required a shift from the surveys that Bruce had been conducting, and from the conservation effort that Clayton had promoted, as well as the careful gathering of the material that had already come to light, and involved new, ambitious, and costly excavation campaigns, comparable to those that had been carried out in Southern England. It also required new institutional conditions, and new convergences and synergies between antiquarian societies and universities.[15]

12 See Bruce (1905), 164–166.

13 See the summary of the speech in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* (1887), 124–125, with the comments in Tolia-Kelly 2011, 75–76. The same sentiment may be found in Robert White's 1867 poem *To a Friend: on Visiting the Roman Wall,* which also features a reference to Gibbon (quoted in Hingley 2012, 154).

14 Mommsen (1885), 169.

15 Birley (1961), 64–69 remains the most effective discussion of that transformational phase. The need for sustained collaboration between universities and learned societies is strongly stated at the end of Haverfield's inaugural address to the AGM of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies: Haverfield (1911), xix–xx.

3. FRANCIS HAVERFIELD'S REAPPRAISAL OF THE WALL

A key figure in that new development was an Oxford ancient historian, Francis Haverfield (1860–1919), who had worked under Mommsen in the 1880s.[16] In a note he published in the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society,* he remarked that within the space of a decade a considerable gap had emerged between the work conducted on the German *limes* and that on the Wall: the fundamental difference was that the extent of the archaeological investigation conducted in Northern England was inadequate: "The spade was rarely used to prove theories which were suggested by the appearance of the ground".[17] Haverfield made a strong case for a change of approach and for the rewards it could yield. A key problem to explore was the relationship between the Wall and the Vallum, the earthwork that runs roughly parallel to it on the southern side. Haverfield earnestly critiques the work of Bruce and his predecessors, and denies that the Vallum had any military function; it was a "ditch between mounds", probably contemporary to the Wall, which it intentionally avoids, and serving as a "civil or legal delimitation".[18] The differentiation between military and legal functions was a new idea, which is directly linked to the definition of a new working principle, whereby "the spade alone can resolve the puzzle".[19]

This distinctive combination of big questions and firm engagement with detail is a major aspect of the contribution of Haverfield to the field, and is apparent in his best-known study, the short book *The Romanization of Roman Britain,* based on a 1905 British Academy lecture, in which the concept of "Romanization" – by then well embedded in other scholarly traditions – was first used in English-speaking historiography as the pivot of a sustained argument.[20] Haverfield took issue with the widespread assumption that the Romans and Britons were as different from one another as the modern Englishman and the Indian, and that

16 See Freeman (2007) for a formidably rich discussion of Haverfield's life and work: see esp. 123–140, 153–164, on the connection with Mommsen.

17 Haverfield 1899, 337. On the significance of this intervention and its background see Browning (1991), 355–357 and Freeman (2007), 269–270.

18 Haverfield (1899), 342. This possibility is still entertained in Collingwood and Myres (1937), 124.

19 Haverfield (1899), 343.

20 Haverfield (1905). On its usage see Hingley (2008), 315–319 and Lambert (2024), 30–35.

Roman civilisation had virtually no impact on the province, leaving "the natives almost as Celtic as their coming had found them nearly four hundred years before".[21] He instead sought to complicate that picture by identifying a fundamental difference between southern Britain, where there is a relatively strong and complex network of urban centres, and the north, which was occupied by troops. The extent and quality of Romanization thus varied considerably within the province itself. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Wall and the Vallum should have a rather marginal role in Haverfield's big-picture account.

They did receive a fuller discussion in the 1907 Ford Lectures on the occupation of Britain, which were published posthumously and are arguably the most powerful testimony to the importance of Haverfield's scholarship.[22] The Wall is envisaged as a stage in the military conquest of the island: not as a final step, but as one that was never reversed: the frontier was never south of it, and the "northern tribes" were "barred… from their southern kinsmen" (119). Haverfield first envisaged a two-stage process, in which Hadrian first built a sod wall, which lasted roughly ninety years, and was replaced by a stone wall built by Septimius Severus; later discoveries persuaded him that the latter was in fact earlier. Three points of general importance are worth stressing for our purposes: Haverfield's view that the Wall had a plain defensive purpose, and served it until the end of Roman rule in Britain, unlike the Antonine Wall, which fell to the Caledonians four decades after its construction;[23] that it was not intended as "the final limit of Roman occupation"; and that sustained collaboration among, and investment from, different institutions were needed to further its understanding.

4. DEFENSIVE READINGS AND COLONIAL ANALOGIES

The emphasis that Haverfield placed on the defensive function of the Wall chimes with other contemporary responses to it, and it is tempting to link it with wider political and social anxieties. In an important essay in which he set

21 Haverfield (1924), 23.

22 See Freeman (2007), 482–484.

23 The Antonine Wall was occasionally referred to as a frontier of civilisation: see e.g. R. Stevenson's *The Wrecker* (1892), where an analogy with the North American West Coast is entertained (discussed in Malamud [2010], 249–250).

out to compare and contrast imperial Rome and the British Empire, Sir Charles Lucas (1853–1931) – a distinguished civil servant in the colonial administration – established a "rough analogy" between the Roman Wall and the northern frontier of India: they were both intended to "obstruct coming and going", giving "security to the enclosed area", and at the same time acting as a "preserve for barbarism outside it".[24] The analogy, though, goes to show the fundamental difference between the Roman and British imperial projects: while Rome is keen to draw limits, Britain trade and colonization tend to have none. A decade earlier, in 1901, James Bryce (1838–1922) had given a similar assessment in his comparative discussion of the Roman and British empires, stressing the contrast between the attempt to create a "scientific frontier" in Hadrian's time and the ability of the British, who could afford to fortify only a small number of sites.[25] In a wide-ranging essay on frontiers, the former Viceroy of India and Chancellor of Oxford University Lord George Curzon (1859–1925) took a somewhat different line. In his view, the key function of Hadrian's Wall was to protect the province, rather than delimiting it: it also serves as a tool to control the movements across the boundary ("more a line of trespass than a Frontier"). It fulfilled its function well for centuries, until the pressure of the "ever-mounting crest of the barbarian torrent" became impossible to harness. An analogy from the ongoing colonial experience can prove fruitful: the Roman Wall may fairly be compared with the Customs Hedge in northern India, established by the British in 1843, and stretching almost 2,500 miles.[26]

This set of concerns take a striking visual form in a painting by the Tynemouth-born artist Robert Spence (1871–1964), made between 1912 and 1914, *The Night Attack,* and now owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, which depicts an attack of the Caledonians on the fort of Housesteads. The viewpoint is squarely internal to the Roman camp, and neatly captures the moment when the assailants break the gate open; the order of the Roman camp is about to be undone.[27] Other portions of the Wall, in the distance, are on fire. The sentiment

24 Lucas (1912), 61–62. See Hingley (2000), 45.

25 Bryce (1914), 18–19. Desideri (1991), 612–616 remains invaluable on the wider historiographical significance of Bryce's project.

26 Curzon (1908), 23–26. See Hingley (2000), 41–42, 44–45. The Italian edition by A. Zarlenga (Curzon [2022]) offers a very helpful introduction. For a recent discussion of the projects of Lucas and Curzon see Lambert (2024), 18–25.

27 See Hingley (2000), 48 for a reasonably good image of the painting.

could hardly be further away from that of the Wallington mural. Yet the scene does not depict the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, or the demise of the Wall: as the full title of the painting makes clear, Spence placed the attack "during the second century". Whatever the might of the attackers, order will be restored. **(Figure 2)**

In the previous year, the Oxford historian Charles R. L. Fletcher (1857–1934) and the distinguished writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) published a *History of England* "written for all boys and girls who are interested in the story of Great Britain and her Empire", as the preface states.[28] The main text was written by Fletcher, while the poems that are interspersed through the narrative are Kipling's work; the discussion is accompanied and reinforced by illustrations by Henry Ford. The work takes the widest possible chronological compass, and the opening chapter discusses the period from the earliest times to the departure of the Romans. The brutal aspects of the Roman conquest are not glossed over, especially in the aftermath of the Boudicca revolt, but its effects are judged in unreservedly positive terms: "such peace and good government as Britain had never seen before" (15). The Roman imperial project had only one crucial shortcoming: it did not stretch far enough. Rome failed to conquer the whole island. Agricola did invade Scotland, but did not leave "traces of civilization behind him", and Ireland was not touched at all. Fletcher's language has rightly been denounced as xenophobic: "Ireland never went to school, and has been a spoilt child ever since".[29] The construction of Hadrian's Wall marks and defends the "Scottish frontier", and separates the province from the Celts to the North, "almost untouched, certainly unsubdued".[30] Roman Britain has a history of prosperity, which bears the germs of complacency and decline: it "went to sleep behind her walls". The process is hastened by the distraction and incompetence of the Roman authorities, and is a symptom of a wider crisis of the Empire. For Britain, though, the consequences are especially grave: it faces pressure from the Picts at the North, from the Celtic Scots from Ireland, and from "Englishmen and

28 Fletcher and Kipling (1911).

29 The attitude was far from unparalleled: Mr King, the master in Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* stories (published in 1899), once voices that same sentiment; C. Merivale expressed similar views in a letter of 1840, written during a trip to Ireland (references and brief discussion in Vance [1997], 239).

30 Cf. Hingley (2010) for a general discussion of the role of the Wall in debates on the divide between England and Scotland.

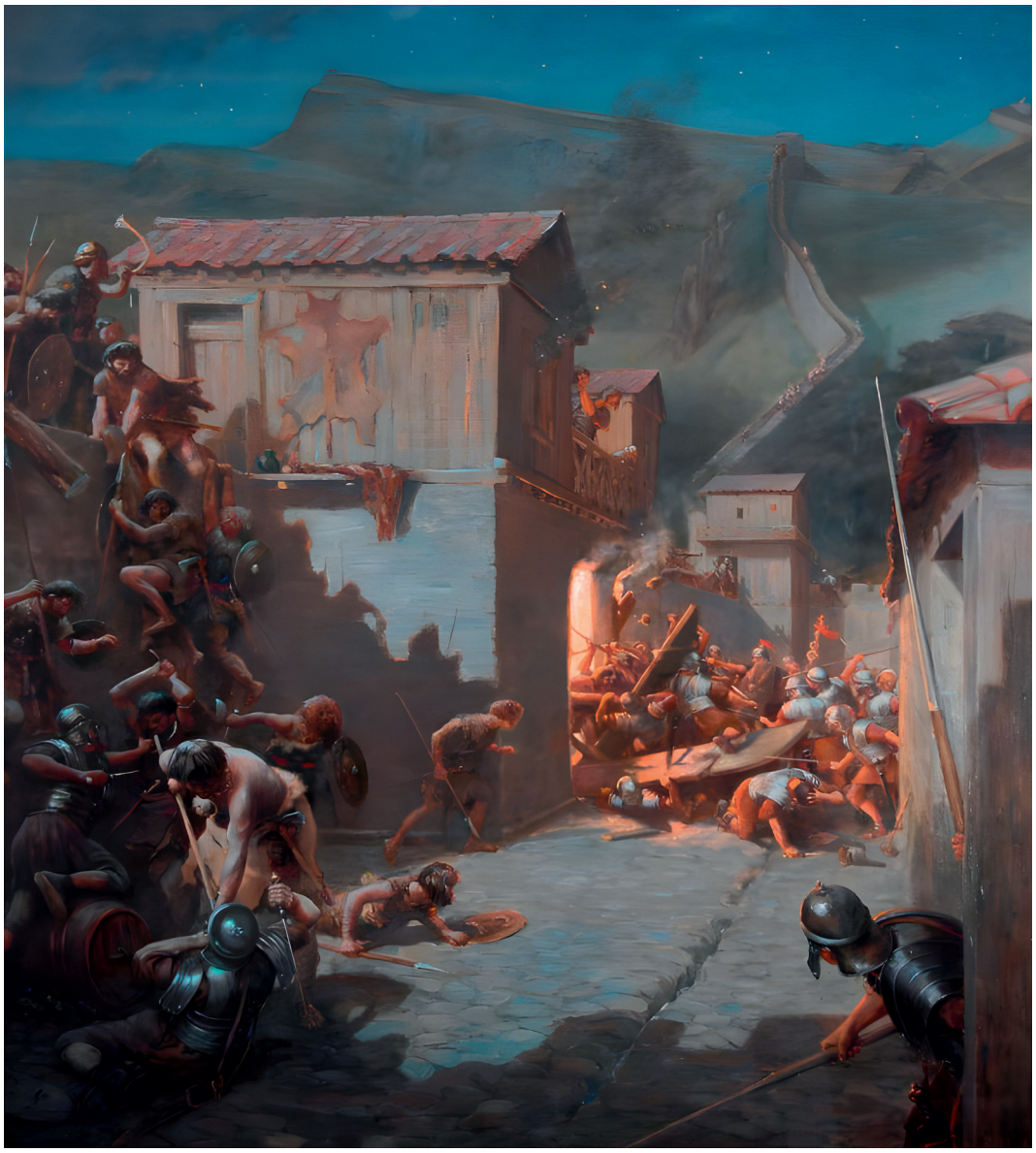

Figure 2 Robert Spence, *The Attack on the North Gate at Housesteads by the Caledonians,* 1912, The Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne. Reproduced by permission.

Saxons" across the North Sea. The rise of "pirates" brings down "the walls and defences of Britain", and civilisation itself comes to an end, only to be revived centuries later; its first beacon will be the arrival of the Christian missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great in 597. **(Figure 3)**

The Wall, then, is a mark of Roman civilisation, a frontier, and the unintended enabler of a process of decline. Ford's illustration suggests a far less problematic take, and squarely focuses on the first aspect: it depicts a moment in the construction of the Wall, in which a Roman officer oversees the labour of a crowd of faceless Britons, carrying on their shoulders the stones that will come to be part of the wall.[31] Their appearance is rather different from that of the Picts represented on the Wallington mural, and rather suggests associations with prehistory; the Wall in the background resembles a medieval castle, rather than any site of Roman Britain. Another strong line of continuity between the Roman empire and imperial Britain is suggested through that visual association. Kipling's contribution takes a different take, though. In the poem *The Roman Centurion Speaks,* which is inserted right in the middle of Fletcher's account of the rewards of Roman civilisation, an army officer addresses his legate on the day when the withdrawal of his cohort from the province is decided, and begs to let him stay. Britain has become his native land, as "time, custom, grief and toil, age, memory, service, love" have rooted him there.

The point is not elaborated further by Fletcher, but Kipling came back to the wider theme about a decade later, in a speech he gave to the Royal Society of St George.[32] The tone of the intervention is a times rather playful, as befitted the occasion, but at the core there is a serious point: the English are a mixed race, which has been ruled by a number of different peoples, and were influenced by many more, from the Phoenicians to the Dutch; since the accession of James I, they have been subjugated by the Scot, "under pretext of union" (179).[33] The speech opens with a strange story, whose provenance is left unstated. One night every year the Romans let the Picts and the Scots who lived on the other side of the Wall say what they thought of them. Kipling claims to be doing the same, now that "the Wall is down and the Picts and Scots are on this side of it" (178). As an Englishman, he claims to be doing what the subjects of Rome used to do, with the significant proviso that he is not divided from his masters by a wall, and

31 See Figure 2.

32 Kipling (1928).

33 On this speech and the dynamics of exclusion that pervade it see Hingley (2010), 38–39.

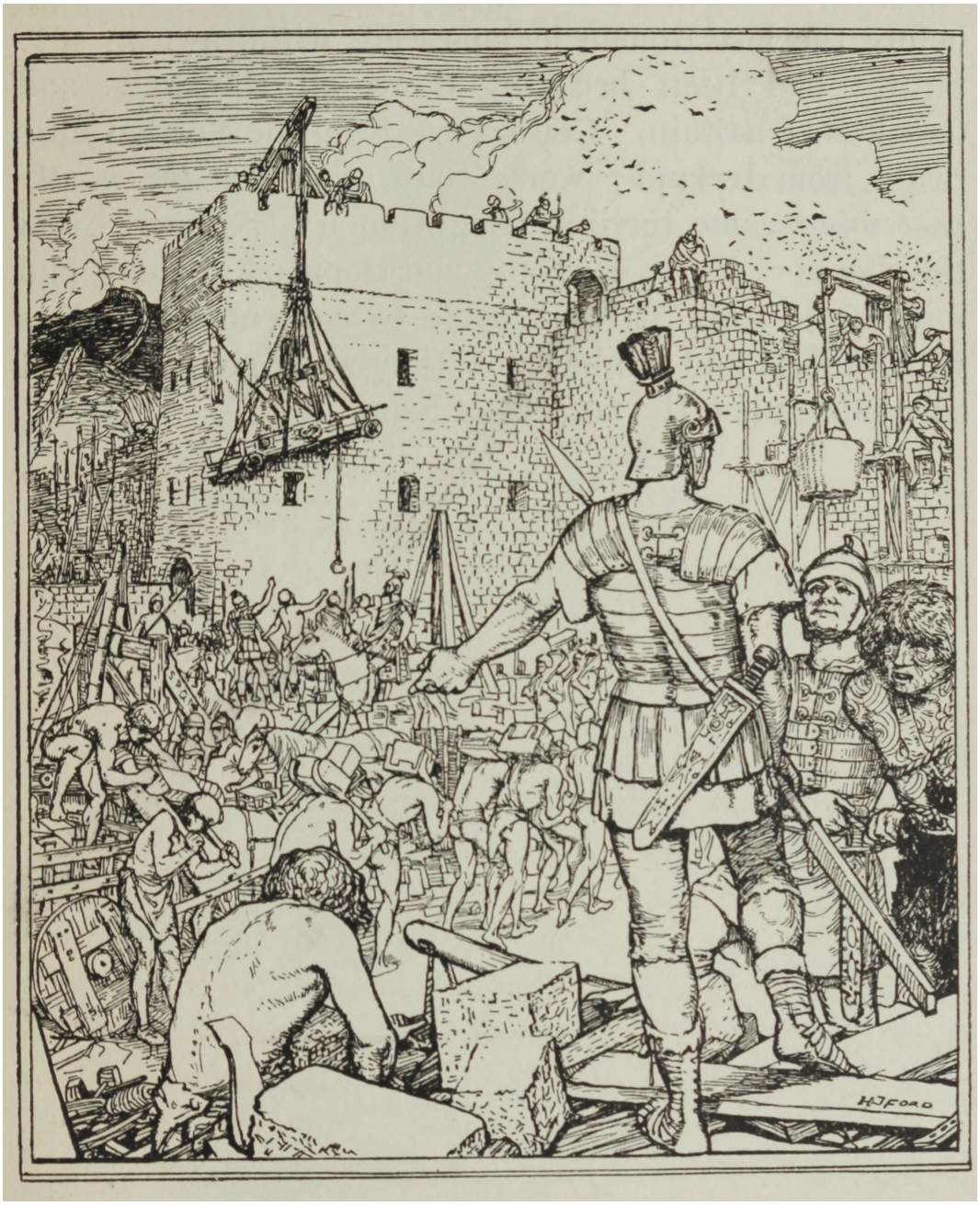

Figure 3 Henry J. Ford, *The Building of the Wall*, from C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford 1911) 23. Reproduced from Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/schoolhistoryofeooflet/page/22/mode/2up

he cannot expect them to be quite as tolerant as the Romans used to be – while "imperturbable tolerance" is a key national trait of the English. The collapse of the Wall, of course, is one of the very factors that made the English so mixed, and so unique.

By according such a prominent place to the Wall in his speech, Kipling no doubt intended to prompt the memory of a well-known work of his, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, published in 1905, and partly set on Hadrian's Wall. One of the narrators of the series of tales that make up the book is the centurion Parnesius: a native of the isle of Wight, who calls himself a Roman even though he has never seen the Eternal City; his father urged him to serve in the army, and to fight for the defence of the island from the attacks of the Picts; the account of his journey to the Wall, as the roads become emptier and the settlements smaller, must be one of the most powerful literary descriptions of the Roman frontier.[34] That is a largely fictional account, just as that of a single town that ran from one end of the Wall to another. The Wall is represented as a monument, rather than a military site. Parnesius is not involved in any military action, as the Picts seldom fight, and most of them have moved to the north of the province; some "tame Picts" have stayed in the area and are doing small business with the Romans. Parnesius readily establishes himself as one of the few Romans who are able to understand and effectively deal with the Picts: his opinion of them, though, is unreservedly scathing, as he defines as "improvident little animals" who must be kept at bay by the occasional donation of corn; he comes to regard them as "in

34 "Just when you think you are at the world's end, you see a smoke from East to West as far as the eye can turn, and then, under it, also as far as the eye can stretch, houses and temples, shops and theatres, barracks and granaries, trickling along like dice behind – always behind – one long, low, rising and falling, and hiding and showing line of towers. And that is the Wall!" – Rosemary Sutcliff, a lifelong admirer of Kipling, described the newly constructed Wall in closely comparable terms in *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954): "From Luguvallium in the west to Segedunum in the east, the Wall ran, leaping along with the jagged contours of the land; a great gash of stone-work, still raw with newness. Eighty miles of fortresses, mile-castles, watch-towers, strung on one great curtain wall, and backed by the vallum ditch and the coast-to-coast Legionary road; and huddled along its southern side, the low sprawl of wine shops, temples, married quarters, and markets that always gathered in the wake of the Legions. A great and never-ceasing smother of noise: voices, marching feet, turning wheels, the ring of hammer on armourer's anvil, the clear calling of trumpets over all. This was the great Wall of Hadrian, shutting out the menace of the north". The standpoint, though, is that of a bird-eye view, and the defensive purpose of the Wall, which is a leading theme of the novel, is emphatically spelled out, rather than its liminal position.

some sort my children". Even when the situation on the Wall appears to be reasonably stable, though, Parnesius is acutely aware of the danger, and of the consequences that the emperor Maximus' failure to send him reinforcements will have. After the emperor's death, Parnesius and his men endure a long attack of the Picts, for over two months, until the enemy withdraw and they are reached by the troops of Theodosius, the new emperor, whom Parnesius duly refuses to serve.[35] Like in Spence's painting, the fall of Roman Britain is not quite happening just yet, but its conditions are well in place.[36] In the poem that closes the story, *A Pict Song*, the Picts speak of themselves as "the worm in the wood, the rot in the root", and freely acknowledge that they are not strong – "but we know Peoples who are. Yes, and we'll guide them along, to smash and destroy you in War!".

5. COLLINGWOOD'S TARGETED EXCAVATIONS AND THE RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE FRONTIER

In the early twentieth century, then, the reading of the Wall as a defensive structure was as influential as it was fraught with reservations, qualifications, and fragilities. Further layers of complexity were added by the developments of archaeological research, which continued at a pace until the outbreak of the war. Haverfield's case for a methodological shift proved compelling, and set the agenda irreversibly, even though from the start of the century Haverfield was no longer directly involved in archaeological work. A major figure in that phase was Frank Gerald Simpson (1882–1955), who carried out crucial work at Birdoswald;[37] the scholar who recognised and articulated most clearly the historical and conceptual implications of that new season in the study of Hadrian's Wall was a pupil of Haverfield, whose unique intellectual trajectory took him to the intersection between archaeology and metaphysics: Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943).

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35 On the impact of *Puck of Pook's Hill* see Hingley (2000), 56–58; cf. also Symonds (2021), 56–58 and Stewart (2016), 81. On Kipling's complex take on the Christianisation of the Empire see Walsh (2021), 375–380.

36 On Kipling's keen interest in the end of Roman Britain see Adler (2015), 169–174.

37 See Birley (1961), 200–203.

Like Haverfield, Collingwood had no direct connection with the North East; his career was entirely spent at Oxford. His commitment to the principle of concentrated archaeological work on carefully selected portions of the Wall was based on strong theoretical foundations, which are directly linked to the philosophical dimension of Collingwood's interests. They are articulated in two papers published in the *Journal of Roman Studies* ten years apart, in 1921 and in 1931. The first one is a magisterial overview of the scholarship on the Wall since Camden, which ends with a discussion of Simpson's work and on overview of the open problems; in fact, as briefly mentioned at the start of this discussion, the whole paper frames Hadrian's Wall as a *problem*.[38] The second piece is a survey of the work carried out in the previous decade, where the key stakes of ongoing research are spelled out. That does not stop Collingwood from pursuing a rather technical discussion. His starting point, in fact, is that professional archaeologists, committed to the method of selective excavation, are now devoting their energy to it; at the same time, there is greater interest among the public, and "general consternation" about the lack of sufficient protection against destruction.[39] Collingwood's conclusions revolve around problems of dating and periodisation. He identifies three phases in the making of the British frontier: first under Trajan, with the creation of some forts at the Stanegate; then with the drawing of the Vallum, early in Hadrian's reign; and finally the Wall, during his visit to Britain in 121 CE. The Wall itself then goes through four phases, until its abandonment in 383. Only three attacks in two and a half centuries saw any damage being caused to the Wall, mostly when it had been left unguarded. As a frontier defence, the Wall served its purpose very effectively.[40] Only detailed archaeological work had made that conclusion attainable. Collingwood does not draw attention to the tension between this reading and the argument that he had put forward in another essay published in 1921 (and reprinted in the appendix to this paper), in a rather obscure regional publication, where he had suggested that the Wall was not a large-scale defensive structure, but a sentry walk, which was intended to control traffic into and out of the province – a view that devel-

38 Collingwood (1921a). On the philosophical implications of this approach see van der Dussen (1981), 225–253; Salas (1987), 66–69; Couse (1990), 62–77; Browning (1995), 337–357; Birley (2013), 272–274.

39 Collingwood (1931), 39.

40 Collingwood (1931), 61.

oped Haverfield's insight into the function of the Vallum as a frontier, and had considerable impact on later debates on the Wall.[41]

Collingwood devotes the final part of his 1931 essay to a plea for the general significance of that specific finding to the wider interpretation of the Roman empire, and for the profound methodological implications of the study of that "single highly complex problem". The fundamental postulate of the project, though, is that "the real is the rational and the rational is the real"; and history can prove its worth only by demonstrating the rationality of its subject matter.[42] The Wall, then, turns into an invaluable opportunity to recognise an immanent order to the world. Collingwood's discussion develops in clear and radical terms an important layer of the link between the construction of the Wall and the wider political and social order. The connection also emerges from the overviews of the archaeology of Roman Britain that Collingwood produced in the 1930s, in which the "making of the frontier" is singled out as a cardinal problem.[43]

In those very years a literary text framed the problem in altogether different, but not unrelated terms. The plot of the fantasy novel *Land Under England,* published in 1935 by the Irish writer Joseph O'Neill (1886–1952), builds on the fascination that the father of the protagonist has with Rome and Hadrian's Wall. When the man disappears, his son Anthony seeks him out in the Cumbrian countryside, following the trail of their many trips along the Wall. He goes on to discover the "secret of the Wall" under a pond: a trapdoor that becomes visible once the water runs dry, and that leads him into an underworld populated by the descendants of the Roman soldiers that used to be quartered on the Wall, now ruled by a despotic regime that controls their thought by telepathy, and leaves no room for individual agency. Anthony is presented with a reverse image of the Empire: there is a Roma Nova, and there is Central Sea that clearly mirrors the Mediterranean. Virgil and Dante are obvious intertexts; the allusions to

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41 Collingwood (1921b). The view is still implied in Collingwood (1930), 78 ("it cannot be defended"). See Birley (2013), 277–278, esp. n. 10, drawing attention to some dissenting voices that emerged in the early 21st century; cf. 284 n. 22 on later assessments of the *Vallum.* See also Dench (2018), 61–62.

42 Collingwood (1931), 62. Browning (1995), 338–339 views this passage as evidence for Collingwood's position as the initiator of a "Baconian revolution in history".

43 That is the title of ch. 8 of Collingwood and Myres (1937), 120–139 (see esp. 133 on the military and financial functions of the Roman frontier); cf. also Collingwood (1930), 64–91, esp. 73–86 on the "Hadrianic frontier".

Fascist totalitarianism are also evident, but the Irish background of the author and the political context of newly independent Ireland may also be playing a significant role.[44] The Wall is turned into a new kind of boundary, which is as political as it is anthropological. It is a deceptively porous one, which must be crossed in order to overcome a crisis or get to attain truths that are otherwise hidden; the crossing, though, is vertical, rather than horizontal; and the protagonist is himself the descendant of Romans (or so his surname suggests), who is confronted with fellow-Romans that live under a stiflingly authoritarian regime, where the holders of power are not quite visible.

6. TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFTERLIVES

As we have seen, the problem of the continuity of British history was a significant strand in the reflection on the Wall between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. When Winston Churchill (1874–1965) set out to produce *A History of the English-speaking Peoples*, though, it was readily solved. The focus was placed on the need to discuss the origins of civilisation in Britain, and the arrival of Caesar's troops proved a neat starting point; English history was carefully distinguished from British history, and its inception coincided with the victorious arrival of the Saxons. The work was published in 1952, but the bulk of it was written by 1937. The decision not to confine the discussion to England or Britain, but to take the standpoint of the history of the whole English-speaking world is not surprising, both in light of Churchill's political trajectory and of the coincidental fact that his mother was American.

Rome is a necessary opening section for the large-scale project that Churchill developed. He describes Roman rule in warmly favourable terms, as "the happiest, most comfortable, and most enlightened times" (35) that the inhabitants of Britain had ever experienced; it was nonetheless the outcome of a process of conquest, through which Rome got to assert its superior military might. The frontiers remain troublesome sites, which require the deployment of a robust contingent of troops; Churchill acknowledges the importance of that aspect of the problem in his discussion of the Wall, which implicitly takes its cue from

44 Howard (2019).

Haverfield's distinction between Wall and Vallum as military defence infrastructure and provincial boundary respectively.

In a remarkable passage, Churchill wonders how a native of Roman Chester would fare if he were to wake up in 1930s Britain. A long inventory of analogies and differences follow; the most striking one is surely that the Roman visitor "would have the same sense of belonging to a society which was threatened, and to an imperial rule which had passed its prime" (43). The following account of the process that led to the demise of the empire in the West was in keeping with that sentiment: from the third century the empire was under increasing strain, both internal and external, and the "floods of new untamed life" presented new challenges that only a renewed spirit of discipline and cohesion could face effectively. The Wall fulfilled its defensive mission until about 300 CE, in spite of the recurring attacks of Picts and Scots; it then had to be supplemented with a set of fortresses at various sites on the southern and eastern shores. The effort was generous, but ultimately unsuccessful: by the end of the century it had been "pierced" several times. Roman civilisation was "wrecked" across Britain, in Churchill's assessment, by the early sixth century. Repairing that damage would take centuries. While Britain had been an active, if marginal part of a world state; England was "once again a barbarian island".

The demise of the Wall is thus the symptom of a process of much greater proportions and significance. The mass migration that led to the end of Roman Britain was largely from the sea, and no defensive infrastructure could have possibly weathered it. The only substantial hurdle that the Anglo-Saxon invasion faced was a landscape feature: Mount Badon, where the Britons won a major battle at the end of the fifth century or the start of the sixth. Not even Rome had sought to expand in those parts, and the fact that that a mountain turned out to be a "citadel of the British race" is both testimony to the valour of the British resistance and a sign of the extent of the decline that set in with the end of the Roman province. A new history had well and truly begun.

Churchill's decision to write a history of the English-speaking peoples is in itself a response to the realignment in world politics that had intervened in the first half of the twentieth century, and would gain further momentum after World War II. The history of Hadrian's Wall in the post-war period, and in the age in which the British Empire is undone, lies beyond the remit of this paper. However, some fundamental and problematic levels of continuity between the distant past and the present are most strikingly brought to the fore in a piece written shortly before the war by W. H. Auden (1907–1973) for a 1937 BBC radio broadcast entitled *Hadrian's Wall from Julius Caesar* to *the National Trust,* which

is worth touching upon by way of conclusion.[45] The recording of the programme does not survive, but two typescripts preserve it almost in its entirety. It featured the reading of a poem that was going to gain considerable notoriety after World War II under the title *Roman Wall Blues,* where a Roman soldier voices fundamentally different feelings to those of the protagonist of Kipling's *A Centurion Speaks* (ll. 3–6, 12):

> The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
> I am a Wall soldier, and I don't know why.
> The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
> my girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone …
> I want my girl and I want my pay.[46]

The core of the broadcast was an extensive prose piece in which a narrator and several other speaking voices go through the history of Britain in antiquity, since the early journeys of the Phoenicians, down to the end of Roman rule. The construction of the Wall receives special attention. Auden retells the story through the fictional dialogues of a family of tourists and two ancient inhabitants of the Wall. Hadrian "set out to construct a systematic frontier" (444), which had the purpose of stopping "raiding parties and smugglers" (446);[47] its history is then traced through the Middle Ages to the early modern antiquarian rediscovery of the Wall. In the final vignette two speakers reflect on the Wall in the contemporary world, when "[p]arts of the Wall now belong to The National Trust or The Office of Works. But digging and research continue". The argument they put forward then takes a sharp political turn: "Latin is now a dead language, a school subject and no longer even a compulsory one. The Roman Empire has disappeared, but other empires have taken its place, and the virtues and the vices of Imperialism, its ideal and its scandals, are as great a problem now as then" (455). The final paragraph makes an even more radical contention, and brings the Wall into sharper focus: "That man is born a savage, there needs no other proof than the Roman Wall. It characterises both nations as robbers and murderers. Our old historians always termed the Scots barbarians… Julius Caesar, Agricola,

45 Edited in Auden and Isherwood (1988), 441–455.

46 Auden and Isherwood (1988), 447.

47 Bryce (1914), 18–19 had used a similar language in speaking of a "scientific frontier" (see above).

Antoninus, Severus, etc., went one step further than the Scots. They surprised, murdered, plundered, and kept possession. Our venerable ancestors too, the Saxons, Danes, and Normans who came over in swarms, butchered, robbed and possessed; although they had no more right than I have to your coat. Whoever deprives an unoffending man of his right, is a barbarian" (*ibid.*).

In the notes that he prefaced to an early synopsis of the script, Auden approached the problem of the contemporary relevance of the Wall from a different angle, and in even more explicit terms. He argued that it "stood as a symbol for a certain imperialistic conception of life, for military discipline and an international order; in opposition to Celtic and German tribal loyalties which overwhelmed it, only to be transformed, in their turn… The front of history now lies elsewhere, but the same issues, of order versus liberty; the State versus the individual; the more highly economically developed races versus the less, still remain…".[48] The Wall emerges as a front, rather than as a boundary; it can best be made sense of as a hub of conflict.

It is by no means necessary to be an admirer of the Empire to appreciate the Wall as a marker of power and conflict, and to view it as a prime focus of reflection on historical method. In this fundamental recognition there is an important level of continuity which, in spite of their profound differences, brings together Bruce and Collingwood, Haverfield and Churchill, Kipling and Auden, and cannot cease to interrogate the students of the Wall, and indeed of ancient Rome, in the early twenty-first century.[49]

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48 On this text, first published in *Radio Times* in November 1937, see the editorial note by E. Mendelson in Auden and Isherwood (1988), 675.

49 An earlier Italian version of this paper has appeared as Santangelo (2026). It is a pleasure to restate my gratitude to Fabrizio Oppedisano and Paola S. Salvatori for the invitation to pursue this topic, and to thank Francesco Carriere, Giusto Traina, David Walsh, and two anonymous readers for their comments on various drafts of this paper.

APPENDIX – R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S "THE PURPOSE OF THE ROMAN WALL"

Collingwood's earliest contribution on Hadrian's Wall (Collingwood 1921b) appeared in a regional publication that is hardly accessible outside the United Kingdom: *The Vasculum. The North Country Quarterly of Science and Local History,* 8, 1921, 4–9. It seems apt to reprint this short note, which foregrounds some of the arguments that Collingwood would soon go on to make in the longer piece he published in *Journal of Roman Studies,* 11, 1921 (Collingwood 1921a; cf. 66 n. 1), and includes some thought-provoking engagement with Kipling's depiction of the Wall.

The purpose of the Roman wall
R. G. Collingwood, M.A., F.S.A.

Among the many questions which historians and antiquaries have asked concerning the Roman wall of Northumberland and Cumberland – the most striking and most discussed relic of antiquity, perhaps, in these islands – there is one that has been curiously seldom raised. What precise object had its builders in view? How exactly did they intend to use it, and how did they in fact use it?

The question has not been raised because the answer has been taken for granted. It has always been assumed that the Wall was a military work in the fullest sense, a continuous fortification like the wall of a town, designed to repel or at least to check invading armies not, in this case, attacking the outskirts of any mere city but those of a province. The Roman troops have always been imagined lining the top of the Wall and from that strong position, entrenched as it were on the rampart-walk behind the parapet, repelling the attacks of Caledonian armies that attempted to carry the work by breach or escalade.

Many circumstances help to make such a view credible. The Wall was some eight feet thick and perhaps fifteen to twenty feet high including the parapet: its immense strength – for it is practically a concrete wall cast solid into a facing of ashlar masonry – rendered it proof against anything short of scientific mining-work such as that of the Middle Ages; its tactical position, defended by a great ditch and in many places crowning the summit of inaccessible precipices, seemed specially designed for this kind of employment. But there are certain features of the Wall which have never been taken into account by this view, and seem hardly capable of being reconciled with it. The object of this paper is to state them, and to suggest a possible explanation of them.

(1) The ordinary view has had the advantage of statement in late years by a man peculiarly qualified for the work. To think out of the way in which the Romans can have used their Wall is a task which requires a certain knowledge of Roman antiquities, but, far more, a vivid imagination and a knowledge of what fighting means. That is the special value of Mr. Kipling's picture of the Wall and doings on the Wall in *Puck of Pook's Hill*. He there represents the Roman auxiliary cohorts of the Wall garrison in the traditional way as fighting barbarians from the Wall; and he sees clearly that that implies definite tactical methods, namely archery and catapult or ballista fire. "We are all archers on the Wall, " says his Parnesius; and rightly, if one thinks of the necessities of such a tactical position. But as a matter of the fact the Wall garrison did not consist of archers, and all of the evidence is against Mr. Kipling's liberal supply (or almost any supply) of artillery. The auxiliaries were armed in the ordinary Roman fashion, with the pilum and gladius; and though a heavy throwing-spear like the pilum would be useful to throw off a wall at a Caledonian, each man was only issued with two of them, and their use was to give a kind of "preparation" for a charge with the short sword. A man on the top of the Roman Wall who had thrown his two pila and was armed with nothing but a short sword would be simply put out of action; there would be nothing further for him to do while the enemy began at leisure to prepare their works for a breach or escalade. Late in the history of Roman occupation, the legionary armament was being replaced by the bow and other light weapons, so that by the time of Parnesius (A.D. 383–388), there may have been plenty of archers on the Wall; but when the Wall was designed, and for the first two centuries of its history, there were practically none. Thus the ordinary theory is inconsistent with Roman tactics and armament.

(2) Secondly, it is inconsistent with the general plan of the Wall itself. The rampart walk cannot have been more than three or four feet broad, and that is a very narrow fighting-front. There would be barely room for a man to pass behind the actual firing line; no room, if the "firing" line consisted of men throwing, with the necessary freedom of gesture, a heavy six-foot pilum. It would be practically impossible to reinforce a threatened point, even in the most favourable conditions: wholly impossible to move wounded men. And a few corpses, or a couple of Caledonians who had effected an escalade, would block the walk entirely. For the walk could only be reached from the ground at the turrets, and these were 500 yards apart. Let anyone try to imagine a front-line trench during an attack with the conditions that the "trench" is a wall-top 15 feet from the ground and that access can only be had at points 500 yards apart, the turrets tak-

ing the place of communication trenches; and he will recognize the impossibility of fighting on the Wall in the traditional way.

(3) As for artillery (catapults and ballistæ), the normal width of the Wall leaves no room for them. On the turf wall which Lollius Urbicus built between Forth and Clyde at the command of Antoninus Pius there are what are called "periodic expansions" which might have been artillery-emplacements, though in point of fact it is fairly certain that they were emplacements for signalling-beacons. On Hadrian's Wall there is nothing of the sort. It might be fancied that the tops of the turrets would carry catapults; but the picture of similar turrets on the Danubian frontier-works which are preserved on the Column of Trajan make it quite certain that that turrets of this type with signalling-stations and not emplacements for artillery. If there were any "guns of position" on the Wall they were only at the mile-castles and great forts.

(4) A very striking piece of evidence comes from a certain innovation in defensive works introduced, probably, not very late in the fourth century. This was the invention of bastions. In the second century the Romans built defensive walls in a straight line in front of which as a rule nothing projected. In the third century this still held good, except that gate-towers what were oftener pushed out beyond the wall at this stage. But some time in the fourth century it was discovered that a wall could be periodically flanked by bastions and its strength thereby vastly augmented, especially when the use of bastions coincided with the increasing use of the bow. Fortifications first built in the fourth century appear to have had bastions from the start; at the same time many earlier works dating from the pre-bastion epoch were brought up to date by patching bastions on to them. Examples of the first class are the late forts of the Saxon shore, as at Pevensey, Lympne and elsewhere; of the second class, a conspicuous example is London. Like all civil towns of Roman Britain, London was at first unwalled; When the *pax Romana* became less secure, perhaps about the end of the third century, walls were built there as elsewhere; lastly, bastions were added. Now bastions were never added to Hadrian's Wall: and this is strange if it was the actual defensive line of the frontier. It is true that the cohort-forts of the Hadrianic age were also unbastioned, but their small size and compactness made this additional strength unnecessary, whereas the seventy-three miles of Hadrian's Wall afforded the best possible opportunity for the useful employment of the new device.

These facts – the intrinsic difficulty of fighting on the Wall as it was arranged; the impossibility of doing so with the weapons of the Roman soldier; the absence of bastions and of provision for artillery – may suffice to throw a certain doubt

on the traditional view. That view has been made to seem more reasonable than it is by the modern employment of continuous works of a defensive character; but a careful analysis of the differences between the lines of Torres Vedras, or a modern system of trenches, Hadrian's Wall ought to convince anyone that the wall can hardly have been meant as a defensive work in this sense. In the interests of brevity we may set aside the question whether it could have been adequately manned by the 10,000 men whom it was designed to accommodate, and the question whether Roman officers, trained in the tradition of fighting in the open and sleeping behind fortifications, would have planned such a work for such a purpose; and proceed to suggest an alternative explanation.

From an early period the Romans adopted the principle of reducing and securing enemy country by means of blockhouses, as they were called in the last phase of the South African war; small fortified posts with stationary garrisons, mobile in so far as they could strike a sudden blow in any direction, but fixed to their post rather than moving about the country. It became a recognised part, and a highly important part, of Roman military science to design, carry out, and maintain a network of such posts after the field army of conquest had done it preliminary work of breaking down concentrated enemy forces. Two great men of the early Empire are especially known to us for their skill in this craft: the emperor Tiberius, who in his brilliant youth practised it on the middle Danube, and Agricola in Britain. We are only now beginning to recover the blockhouse-system of Agricola, fort by fort: we know that it spread thickly over the north of England and extended over the Cheviots and beyond the Forth to the other side of Perth. Sometimes, even as early as the time of Agricola, the forts tend to group themselves in something that may be called a defensive line; this happens with Agricola's own forts along the Forth-Clyde line, rebuilt and connected with a turf wall 60 years later by Lollius Urbicus. But in such cases there is nothing like a continuous wall; only a line of forts a few miles apart.

The continuous wall, or fence, or ditch, begins about the same time or a little later. But in its origin it serves a different purpose from the line of forts; for while the latter contain bodies of troops intended to cope with armed enemy forces, the continuous line was at first designed to serve simply as a mark to show where the Roman territory ended. With this primary function was combined the secondary function, not always emphasised by the character of the work, of being an obstacle to smugglers, or robbers, or other undesirables. A man from beyond the frontier, found on the Roman side of the line, could not plead ignorance or innocent intentions if the line was clearly marked; and if, in addition, it was a slight obstacle, crossing it otherwise then at the authorised and control

gateways was proof of a sinister purpose. All this is abundantly clear from the actual character of the German frontiers of the Roman Empire, which are closely analogous to the British. But the British frontier is apparently a later and more highly developed example of the same type. We have here three developed examples of the same type. We have here three elements: the forts, the Vallum, and the Wall with its annexed milecastles and turrets. The Vallum has been for centuries a puzzle to antiquaries simply because they approached it with the preconception that it must have been meant for defensive earthwork. How it can have been defended no one has ever informed us, and everyone who has thought about it has concluded that it cannot have been, except subject to some impossible condition (as, reinforced by palisades, which never existed). The puzzle of the Vallum simply disappeared when it is suggested that it was not a defensive work but a frontier-mark, a line indelibly impressed upon the earth to show the wandering native where he might not go without accounting for his movements. Here the line-element is emphasised, and the secondary obstacle-element is wholly absent, for even in its first youth the Vallum was no obstacle to anything short of wheeled traffic.

The non-military character of the Vallum is today an accepted fact; no one unless he is twenty-five years out of date in his information regards it as anything but a Roman frontier-mark. But the abandonment of a military theory of the Vallum seems to prepare the way for a similar process of thought in relation to the Wall. Mr. F. Gerald Simpson has shown, in a paper shortly to be published, that the first Hadrianic frontier in Britain consisted of the stone forts, much as we know them, connected by the Vallum: that is to say a frontier-mark was drawn upon the ground and fortified by blockhouses: and that after a short time the non-defensive Vallum was replaced by the Wall.[50] What was the exact significance of this change?

It was not, in the present writer's opinion, the substitution of a fortification for a mere mark. We have already seen the difficulties in the way of regarding the Wall as a fortification directed against invading armies. The Wall which took the place of the slightly earlier Vallum was a work of the same pattern, belonging to the same series, as the Vallum itself: the series of frontier-marks whose primary function might or might not be combined with the secondary function

50 *Editorial note:* this is a reference to F. G. Simpson and R. C. Shaw, *The Purpose and Date of the* Vallum *and its Crossings,* in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society,* 2, 1922, 353–433.

of being an obstacle to readers or smugglers. The wall took the line of the crags not for tactical reasons but in order to increase the outlook of the sentries: for in essence the entire structure was an elevated sentry-walk, the centuries being supplied from the garrisons of the milecastles and having the turrets as their immediate quarters when on duty. And the work of garrisoning the milecastles may well have fallen in rotation upon the centuries of the cohort in the nearest fort.

The frontier was always more or less disturbed; but the existence of a properly patrolled wall would be enough to prevent minor disturbances in the shape of small parties of raiders or expelled malefactors from northern tribes from penetrating into Roman territory. Anyone who had good reasons for coming in could come through the forts or by the gate on Dere Street at Stagshaw Bank. But when disturbance ripened into war, when large forces from the north advanced upon the Wall and attempted (as no doubt they did, not always unsuccessfully) to penetrate it, we cannot imagine that the Roman cohorts actually lined up on the rampart-walk to repel them, still less than Hadrian's engineers ever contemplated such a proceeding. They threw open the north gates and marched out to fight them *more Romano.*

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Greek Bodies Shaping the Modern Cosmetics Industry

Abstract This article examines the use of ancient Greek imagery in contemporary beauty marketing, focusing on the 2023 collaboration between Lancôme and the Louvre which drew inspiration from classical sculptures – primarily Greek but also Roman, whose role in transmitting, adapting, and sometimes reshaping Greek aesthetics is crucial for understanding the modern classical ideal. By analyzing historical and modern marketing strategies, this study traces how Lancôme has consistently referenced classical art since its inception in 1935. The discussion explores how white marble statues became synonymous with beauty, despite evidence of their original polychrome. While the inclusion of diverse brand ambassadors suggests an attempt to modernize classical aesthetics, the campaign arguably reinscribes a Eurocentric beauty paradigm that remains indebted to 19th-century receptions of white marble sculptures as the aesthetic ideal. Finally, the study examines how statues like the Venus de Milo and The Winged Victory of Samothrace have been reinterpreted as symbols of empowerment, feminism, and inclusivity. Through a critical lens, it interrogates whether classical art in advertising serves as an inclusive tool or reinforces a selective, Western-centric aesthetic.

Keywords Ancient Greek Art, Beauty Marketing, Polychrome, Luxury Branding, Inclusivity

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Advertising campaigns often draw inspiration from historical figures and events, including those from Antiquity:[1] from global companies using famous people to play the role of a Roman emperor[2] to little images on a potato chips package representing the Apollo Belvedere statue,[3] probably to suggest a Greek flavour profile. Similarly, a Lithuanian contemporary art museum used a statue of Hercules in 2024 to promote an exhibition on sexuality, creating a juxtaposition between ancient ideals and modern concerns.[4] These varied examples illustrate how ancient Greek – and to some extent Roman – imagery continues to be mobilized across marketing contexts. Roman culture, which actively appropriated, adapted, and disseminated Greek ideals, played a crucial role in shaping what is now recognized as the classical canon.[5] Roman copies of Greek sculptures, Latin inscriptions, and imperial iconography all contributed to establishing a visual and symbolic repertoire that contemporary advertising still draws upon.

While Antiquity can be invoked across a range of industries,[6] it is particularly prevalent in the beauty sector, where classical imagery often functions as an aesthetic standard to emulate.[7] This is especially evident in the case of the French luxury brand Lancôme.

In autumn 2023, the Louvre Museum and Lancôme collaborated on a new makeup and skincare collection inspired by Antiquity, titled the *Lancôme x Louvre Collection.* The launch campaign was shot at the Louvre Museum, drawing inspiration from eight iconic sculptures housed there. This collaboration reinterpreted classical art through the lens of contemporary beauty standards, potentially bridging the gap between historical and modern ideals of beauty. The accompanying press release highlighted the influence of these works conserved in the Louvre, emphasizing the universality of beauty across time.[8] This

1 Morcillo (2017).

2 Bièvre-Perrin & Pampanay (2017), p. 205.

3 To view the image, see https://chazzchips.com/en-us/products/graikisko-kebabo-skonio-hand-cooked-bulviu-traskuciai-chazz (accessed 18 March 2026).

4 To view the image, see MO muziejus (n.d.) https://mo.lt/kaipkalbeti/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

5 Loar, MacDonald, Padilla Peralta (2017).

6 Bièvre-Perrin, Pampanay (2017).

7 Carlotto (2024).

8 Musée du Louvre (2023).

was by no means the first collaboration of its kind for the Louvre – past collaborations have included brands like Uniqlo[9] and high-profile artists like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, whose 2018 *Apeshit* music video was shot at the museum[10], or, more recently, Lady Gaga[11]. However, what is most fascinating about this campaign is the direct reference to Antiquity which seem to legitimize the brand's claim to be an heir to classical Greek culture as a canon of beauty.

Four current brand ambassadors – actresses Zendaya and Amanda Seyfried, singer Aya Nakamura and model He Cong – embody today's beauty codes. They are featured alongside eight antique sculptures from the Louvre: the Venus de Milo, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, Corinna, Diana of Gabies, the Nymph with the Scorpion, Echo, Hygieia and Hermaphrodite. According to Laurence des Cars, President-Director of the Louvre Museum, the collaboration with Lancôme "highlights with incredible talent the diversity of forms of beauty found in the Louvre collections"[12]. As stated in the Lancôme press release, ancient art "resonates radically with today's society."[13]

This article examines the role of Greek and, to a lesser degree, Roman Antiquity in cosmetics advertising, whereby the contribution of ancient Roman culture to the transmission, adaptation, and reinterpretation of Greek aesthetics[14] is considered crucial to understanding the modern classical ideal and thus modern images of beauty. Addressing an interdisciplinary audience at the intersection of classical reception, visual culture, and critical theory – particularly scholars interested in gender, race, and identity in advertising –, the article sets out to answer how Lancôme utilizes representations of ancient bodies in its marketing, and what messages this conveys about Antiquity and contemporary beauty ideals.

Following Edward Said's foundational work on postcolonial theory, the article considers how elements of his critique of cultural representation emerge in the 2023 collaboration between Lancôme and the Louvre. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argued that Western representations of the East – constructed through lit-

9 Carlotto (2024).

10 Plate (2019).

11 Bindé (2024).

12 Musée du Louvre (2023).

13 *Idem.*

14 Rutledge (2012).

erature, art, and scholarship – served to define the 'Orient' as exotic, backward, and inferior, thereby legitimizing Western authority and dominance. While his critique focused on the Middle East and Asia, the broader mechanism he described – wherein the West constructs and aestheticizes the 'Other' for its own hegemonial purposes – applies more widely. This framework proves helpful in examining how contemporary luxury branding reappropriates classical art, often framing it as universal while masking its Eurocentric and colonial inheritances. In the Lancôme campaign, the use of Greco-Roman imagery – and the selective inclusion of non-Western identities – raises questions about how cultural heritage is mobilized to project an ideal that remains anchored in a Western canon of beauty.

Analyzing how classical art references have been used in beauty marketing furthermore reveals that Lancôme's choice is by no means new. The association between ancient Greek representations and beauty intensified in the 19th century, when white Greek marble was solidified as a beauty ideal – despite evidence that ancient statues were originally painted in colour. Since the brand's inception in the 1930s, Antiquity has played a key role in shaping its visual identity. While the Lancôme campaign predominantly draws on Greek and Hellenistic art, it also incorporates Roman elements – both visually, through Roman copies of Greek sculptures, and linguistically, through Latin product names – highlighting the classical references shaping Western beauty standards.

Based on the research objective outlined above, I will first examine how Antiquity has been reappropriated in beauty marketing, tracing this evolution from the early 20th century to contemporary advertising strategies. Next, I will explore this historical transformation and the persistence of the denial of polychromy in modern visual culture, particularly in the *Louvre x Lancôme* campaign. Finally, I will analyze how classical art is now used to convey messages of inclusivity, a paradoxical yet significant shift in the perception of ancient aesthetics. Through this discussion, I will critically assess whether these classical references challenge or reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards.

MARKETING BEAUTY WITH CLASSICAL ART

The Western world's fascination with ancient Greece and Rome, initiated during the Renaissance, has had an important influence on our day's society.[15] This enduring attraction is particularly evident in the realm of beauty, where references to Antiquity have long been employed for many reasons.[16] As exemplified by the luxury brand Lancôme, the use of classical imagery in beauty advertising remains a prevalent and enduring strategy. The collaboration with the Louvre is a continuation of Lancôme's appropriation[17] of Antiquity from the beginning of the brand's history.[18] Lancôme's strategy is not exceptional, given the widespread use of antique imagery, which has accelerated since the 19th century.[19] The ancient sculptures chosen to inspire the makeup collection tend to evoke values such as femininity, strength, and beauty, which are at the heart of the brand's identity.

The French cosmetics company, founded in 1935 to celebrate femininity and French luxury, quickly incorporated references to Antiquity into its advertising imagery. To promote a lipstick in 1939, the brand featured a bust of a Greek statue wearing the product.[20] In 1948, the launch of a cream called *Nutrix et Galatéis* again drew on the imagery of the ancient world.[21] The invocation of Galatea – a Nereid whose myth is layered with artistic and gendered implications, demon-

15 For example, Squire (2011), Jenkins (2015), Bièvre-Perrin & Pampanay (2018), Moyer et al. (2020).

16 Renault (2021).

17 In this article, I adopt the concept of cultural appropriation to examine the commercial reuse of Greco-Roman art in beauty marketing. While the term is most used to describe the exploitation of living, often marginalized cultures, I extend its application to highlight how classical heritage – repackaged through colonial and Eurocentric visual regimes – is commodified in ways that uphold Western ideals. Rather than suggesting that Antiquity itself is 'owned,' this framing draws attention to how particular versions of the classical past are selectively mobilized to serve contemporary cultural and commercial hierarchies.

18 Guibourgé (2009).

19 Couëlle (2010), Carlà-Uhink, García Morcillo, Walde (2017), Wieber (2020).

20 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/item/38621/Lancome-Cosmetics-1939-Make-up-Lipstick (accessed 18 March 2026).

21 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/fr/item/65125/Lancome-Cosmetics-1948-Nutrix-et-Galateis (accessed 18 March 2026).

strates how classical mythology is mobilized in beauty branding as a metaphor for transformation, purity, and aesthetic legitimacy. Galatea is also the name of the statue which was brought to life in the myth of Pygmalion – another powerful metaphor for transformation and beauty. As M. Squire emphasizes, "Pygmalion uses art to realize his fantasy of the feminine"[22]. The company did not hesitate to place the Latin word *Nutrix* alongside the Greek *Galatea* to enhance the product's symbolic appeal. *Nutrix* is evoked as a nurturing goddess figure, associated with rejuvenation and the restoration of power. Together, the two names suggest a personification of nourishment and repair – qualities that align with the desired effects of the cream, and that draw on the authority and allure of Antiquity. Moreover, the myth is reinterpreted through a shift in agency: it is now the modern female consumer – rather than the ancient male artist – who is responsible for shaping her own beauty. In this updated narrative, the contemporary woman appears to hold the power over her own transformation. The advertising implies that the cream itself enables a woman to embody an ideal. While France often aligns itself with the heritage of ancient Greece, the use of Latin names like *Nutrix* in branding reveals the dominant linguistic influence of Rome. In this case, the Roman legacy manifests in the linguistic sphere, but as the article will show, this influence extends far beyond language – shaping not only visual culture and aesthetic preferences but also underlying ideas concerning gender, race, and cultural authority in beauty marketing.

The following year, in 1949, Lancôme, in a face cream advertisement illustrated by Edmond-Maurice Pérot, clearly adopted an aesthetic resonating with Antiquity: a Greek amphora depicting a naked woman adorned with jewels, crouching down while holding a cosmetic box in her left hand.[23] In 1956, Lancôme used the image of a bust from an ancient statue for advertisements targeted at English-speaking audiences,[24] as if a reference to Antiquity were universally understood as a mark of quality. The words 'imported from France' further emphasized the brand's French identity, as though a bust representing an ancient sculpture had become a symbol of France.[25] In other words, Lancôme reappropriated antique

22 Squire (2011), p. 88.

23 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/item/48847/Lancome-Cosmetics-1949-Nutrix-Galateis-Classical-Antiquity-E-M-Perot (accessed 18 March 2026).

24 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/en/search?q=Lanc%C3%B4me+antiquity&p=1&met=syn (accessed 18 March 2026).

25 Leoussi (2016), p. 58–66.

imagery, not only to evoke timeless beauty, but also to position it as an integral part of French cultural identity.

Given the pervasive use of antique imagery, other brands – beyond those solely associated with beauty, such as Lancôme – also incorporated this visual language into their advertising. For example, an early 20th-century French advertising poster compared the Venus de Milo to a Ford automobile, presenting both as masterpieces.[26] This reflects the influence of classical ideas and imagery spread throughout the 19th century in France and other countries, which helped these nations legitimize their claims to ancient Greek heritage and integrate the Greek body into the public sphere. This integration of ancient imagery into public and commercial life was not merely aesthetic – it was also ideological. In France and across Europe, the Greek body became a symbol of national identity as well as racial and totalitarian ideology.[27] To understand the use of this imagery in the marketing context, we must examine the ideological and political climate in which the Greek body emerged as a model to emulate and identify with.

THE PERFECT GREEK BODY

The appropriation of Antiquity as a part of the Western' identity is observed all through the 19th century. France is one of these countries which tried to legitimize its claim to Ancient Greek heritage and identifying itself as having roots in Ancient Athens. The consequences of this idea can be observed in various contexts where the Ancient Greek body is depicted in public space. For example, the *Palais Bourbon,* a parliamentary building from the late 18th century, features numerous references that highlight the influence of Antiquity in its decor, such as the image of the goddess Athena, the figure most favoured by artists in these representations. The goddess Athena became an allegory of wisdom, science, education, war and even France.[28] The belief that France required physical regeneration through the adoption of Greek principles of bodily cultivation became increasingly prevalent. According to Athena Leoussi, "in order to regain

26 To view the image, see Hprints. (n.d.) https://hprints.com/fr/item/70503/Lincoln-1929-Roger-Soubie-Venus-de-Milo (accessed 18 March 2026).

27 Chapoutot (2012).

28 Champier (2016).

their lost Greek body, the French had to change their way of life: they had to care for their body as their Greek ancestors had done. They should do gymnastics, and make trips to the Mediterranean south of France, and especially Provence, where the roots of France were supposed to lie"[29]. Within this context, the representation of the idealized Greek body in public space came to be seen as both natural and inevitable, and, more importantly, as an exemplar taken as a model.

The adoption of ancient Greek imagery in public space also served as a means to prove the Western world's supremacy over the rest of the world.[30] German historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717 –1788), who played a pioneering role in the emergence of the neoclassical movement, saw classical sculptures made of white marble as the embodiment of ideal beauty.[31] As emerita Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter details, Winckelmann was himself an Eurocentrist who regularly denigrated non-European nationalities such as the Chinese for example.[32] As she puts it, in sculpture, the use of colour came to be associated with barbarism, as it was believed that the refined ancient Greeks were too cultured to paint their artworks.[33] An unconditional defender of Greek art, Winckelmann saw in it the absolute characteristics of beauty. However, he did not travel through Greece to see the traces of polychrome with his own eyes but studied Roman copies that had been passed from one collection to another, so that their colours were completely faded by time and light. Ironically, the 19th-century ideal of 'pure' Greek beauty was constructed through the lens of Roman reproductions, which were often seen as more accessible.[34] Thus, the Roman reinterpretation of Greek art directly shaped what later generations perceived as authentically Greek. Many of the so-called "Greek" sculptures – such as the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* featured in the Lancôme campaign – are, in fact, Roman copies of earlier Greek originals.[35] This example highlights the role of Romans not only in preserving Greek aesthetics but also in shaping the classical canon that modern visual culture continues to draw upon.

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29 Leoussi (2016), p. 65.

30 McCoskey (2012).

31 Colonna, Gallo (2021).

32 Painter (2010), p. 59.

33 *Idem*, p. 60.

34 Jockey (2015).

35 Pensabene (2018).

Winckelmann's idea was widely accepted in 19th-century Europe: the perfect body was imagined as one carved from white marble. Even the discovery of traces of polychromy on ancient Greek art and architecture was met with resistance, and to some extent, it still is.[36] A fierce debate emerged among 19th-century scholars who struggled to accept the existence of polychromy. For example, the German-born French architect Jacques Ignace Hittorff (1792–1867) launched a study on the polychromy of Greek temples.[37] In 1824, he presented the results of archaeological investigations carried out in Sicily, in the former ancient Greek colonies of Agrigento and Selinunte, referring to a practice common throughout Antiquity: the painting of statues and buildings. One of his fiercest opponents was Désiré Raoul-Rochette (1790–1854), an archaeologist and permanent secretary of the French Academy of Fine Arts, who attributed the traces of polychromy in Ancient works to medieval barbarism.[38] Given the unequivocal evidence presented by Hittorff, different theories were proposed to explain away the presence of polychromy on ancient Greek statues and buildings because the notion of a "white Greece"[39] was already widely accepted and to imagine it coloured was apparently too difficult. This persistent ideal of whiteness – rooted in 19th-century Eurocentric interpretations of classical sculpture – continues to influence how ancient bodies are presented and perceived today. Even when modern marketing campaigns aim for inclusivity, they often remain bound to this inherited aesthetic standard.

DENIAL OF POLYCHROMY?

The reception of classical Antiquity has long intersected with ideologies of whiteness and Western superiority – a dynamic visible in both 19th-century nationalism and contemporary visual branding.[40] The 2023 *Lancôme x Louvre* launch campaign aimed to demonstrate that white Greek marble can reflect the diver-

36 Béguin, Renaud, Triquet (2019).

37 Kiene (2015, 2023).

38 Grand-Clément (2007), p. 144.

39 Jockey (2015).

40 McCoskey (2012), Chapoutot (2012), Leoussi (2016), McCoskey (2022).

sity of ethnicities that also share in this common heritage. For example, the campaign featured the Malian-born singer Aya Nakamura juxtaposed with a statue of the poetess Corinne, and the Chinese model He Cong posed next to the Venus de Milo.[41] As the press release communicates, this collaboration highlights the diversity of beauty because it "allows us to send iconic and inspiring images of antiquity on a journey, confronting them with contemporary representations and canons,"[42] comments President-Director of the Louvre Museum. However, by limiting its focus to representations rooted in the Western classical art canon, the museum's collaboration with the luxury brand risks reinforcing the idea that today's beauty must still be validated through Greco-Roman aesthetics. While the campaign aims to promote diversity through its choice of models – particularly by appealing to an audience attuned to issues of inclusivity, such as Black or Asian women – it ultimately frames this diversity within a singular, Eurocentric artistic tradition. Rather than embracing the multiplicity of beauty represented in Ancient art, the campaign foregrounds a narrowly defined aesthetic canon, one largely shaped in the 19th century.[43] This is also reflected in Lancôme's packaging, where the lipstick and eyeshadow palette feature white marble sculpture imagery. This choice is particularly striking given that, as is now widely recognized, Greek statues in Antiquity were originally polychrome. In seeking to persuade diverse groups of cosmetic consumers not only to purchase the product but also to visit the museum, both the Louvre and Lancôme aim to foster a sense of identification between the consumer and the product – an identification mediated through a selective art-historical lens that appears to emphasize whiteness as an ideal to emulate. As Sara Ahmed argues, the language of diversity often functions as a non-performative – a declaration that does not necessarily lead to institutional change but instead works to protect existing structures of privilege.[44] In this context, the campaign's visual gestures toward inclusion may do little to unsettle the deeply embedded Eurocentric aesthetic that continues to define the boundaries of cultural legitimacy and beauty.

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41 To view the image of He Cong standing next to the Venus de Milo, see Abdessamad (2023) https://artreview.com/the-eye-of-the-beholder-louvre-lacome-zendaya-collaboration/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

42 Musée du Louvre (2023).

43 Couëlle (2013).

44 Ahmed (2012).

One of the consumer groups targeted by the Louvre and Lancôme clearly includes Aya Nakamura's audience – a highly diverse public, particularly within the Black community, which might be seen paradoxical given the way the whiteness is emphasized as an example to follow. Interestingly, classical Antiquity has become part of the visual language used by several contemporary Black artists; singers such as Rihanna and Beyoncé regularly incorporate classical imagery into their performances as a way to engage with and reinterpret cultural heritage.[45] For example, in their music video filmed at the Louvre, Beyoncé and her husband stand in front of iconic works like The Winged Victory of Samothrace[46] to assert their connection and to identify with this statue.[47] As Élise Pampanay observes, "the opposition between Black and white skin tones and fabric seems central to the video's visual power".[48] Similarly, the Louvre x Lancôme marketing campaign shares a common goal: to highlight the beauty of classical art as a universal heritage in which individuals can see themselves, regardless of skin colour or ethnicity. Yet, drawing on Said's critique of Western knowledge systems, it is important to question whether such campaigns truly achieve this universalism. As bell hooks argues, racial and cultural difference is often consumed as a sign of progressiveness or rebellion, but such gestures can serve white desire more than they disrupt it.[49] Within this logic, the inclusion of Black or Asian models may appear to challenge Eurocentric ideals while, in fact, reinforcing whiteness as the unspoken standard through a framework that remains anchored in classical, Western aesthetics. This dynamic complicates claims to inclusivity and raises questions about what kind of difference is being represented – and for whom. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, could this collaboration also be seen as a tacit denial of polychromy in Ancient art – the vibrant colours that once adorned classical sculptures, now erased in favour of an idealized whiteness?

45 Bièvre-Perrin (2017b).

46 To view the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA (accessed 18 March 2026).

47 Plate (2019), p. 6.

48 Pampanay (2021), p. 83.

49 hooks (1992), p. 371–372.

A group of scholars has discussed the denial of polychromy in Ancient art within French museums.[50] When exhibitions dedicated to polychromy do take place, they are only temporary, while permanent collections largely ignore the presence of colour, as if it had never existed. This rejection of ancient polychromy is exemplified by the treatment of The Winged Victory of Samothrace. During the restoration campaign, infrared luminescence revealed traces of Egyptian blue on the wings and the lower part of the mantle. However, the digital reconstruction of the headless and armless sculpture, presented in its original position, remains entirely white. This denial is reflected not only in museums but also in visitors' attitudes, as many seem to struggle with the idea of ancient sculptures being polychrome. It underscores how heritage is shaped by an aesthetic approach to form and colour, which in turn influences our perception of these objects as both archaeological artifacts and works of art.[51]

The campaign *Lancôme x Louvre Collection* encapsulates the tensions inherent in the modern reception of classical polychromy: the continued privileging of whiteness, despite archaeological evidence of vibrant coloration, reflects not only aesthetic preferences but deep-settled ideological investments in notions of purity and universality. As Said has shown, cultural canons often present themselves as objective or universal, while in fact functioning ideologically to affirm Western superiority.[52] The enduring preference for white marble – despite archaeological evidence of polychromy – reveals such an aesthetic construction: what is perceived as neutral or classical is often the product of Western historiographical and artistic choices. This prompts a crucial question: to what extent can classical art be mobilized as a tool for articulating inclusivity, and when does such appropriation risk reproducing the very aesthetic and ideological boundaries it aims to dismantle?

50 Béguin, Renaud, Triquet (2019).

51 *Idem.*

52 Said (1978).

EMPOWERED ANTIQUITY? CLASSICAL STATUES IN THE RHETORIC OF INCLUSIVITY

A closer examination of the classical statues chosen for the marketing campaign reveals a reliance on familiar and conventional imagery, rather than innovative or unexpected selections. Some sculptures, such as the Venus de Milo, have already become iconic in the modern world[53] and are widely used not only in beauty marketing but also in other fields.[54] In fact, the Venus de Milo has come to symbolize inclusivity. For example, the sculpture appeared in a 2018 US advertising campaign titled *Venus on the Go,* in which the statue, still without hands, comes to life as a woman navigating daily life with a disability.[55] Using humour, the video employs the ancient sculpture to address social issues while simultaneously promoting pistachios. A couple of years later, two entrepreneurs in Valencia, Spain, came up with the idea of creating ice cream shaped like the famous statue to raise awareness about breast cancer. Named *La Venuseta,* this unique ice cream features a distinctive detail: instead of a breast, a scar is engraved.[56] This imagery serves as a powerful reminder of the reality of cancer and encourages women to undergo regular screenings. More than just a dessert, *La Venuseta* has become a symbol in the fight against cancer. By purchasing it, consumers directly support medical research. Through this initiative, the Venus de Milo reclaims her status as a symbol of femininity, embodying the strength and resilience of women in the face of illness.

53 Jockey (2011).

54 Besnard (2021).

55 Venus de Milo On the Go (2018), https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/venus-de-milo-on-the-go (accessed 18 March 2026). That same year, Handicap International fitted a replica of the Venus de Milo statue with prosthetic arms to raise public awareness of 3D prostheses. To view the image, see A Pair of Prosthetics for the Venus de Milo (2018) https://www.finestresullarte.info/en/news/a-pair-of-prosthetics-for-the-venus-de-milo (accessed 18 March 2026).

56 To view the image see Rosebud (2021) https://vimeo.com/578535020?fl=pl&fe=sh (accessed 18 March 2026).

The same Venus de Milo was later chosen as a symbol for the 2024 Paris Olympics.[57] In front of the National Assembly building in Paris, six sculptures of the ancient goddess were installed on April 2, 2024. These multi-coloured replicas of the Venus de Milo represent different Olympic sports. While they retain the statue's recognizable exposed torso and missing arms, five of the six versions were modified to include both arms, each engaging in a different sport: one playing tennis, another playing basketball, one holding a surfboard and preparing to dive into the waves, another about to throw a spear, one preparing to box, and the last – still missing one arm – holding a bow. French artist Laurent Perbos was responsible for these depictions, and it was not the first time he had incorporated replicas of ancient artworks into his work. Painted in various Olympic colours, these sculptures highlight the Games' core values of equality and respect, emphasizing inclusivity. According to a statement by the French National Assembly, the choice of Venus de Milo aims to challenge the widespread association of sports with masculinity.[58] In this context, the statue has evolved beyond its role as a symbol of beauty, now embodying inclusivity and representation of female strength in modern times.[59]

The Venus de Milo is not the only classical artwork that has become a significant symbol in contemporary society. The Winged Victory of Samothrace has also gained iconic status in pop culture. Lancôme's use of this statue to market a beauty product is part of an ongoing process of appropriating and reinterpreting its image.[60] Reimagined by various artists, The Winged Victory of Samothrace was notably appropriated by the sportswear brand Nike, whose name and wing-shaped logo both evoke the statue's iconic form.[61] In Lancôme's case, The Winged Victory of Samothrace appears to symbolize the strength and independence of the modern 21st-century woman. This interpretation is reinforced by a promotional video featuring French actress Philippine Leroy-Beaulieu, known for

57 For the image see La Beauté et le Geste (2024) https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/16/evenements2/2024/la-beaute-et-le-geste-installation-de-laurent-perbos (accessed 18 March 2026).

58 Lesage-Münch & Epoque, 2024.

59 Franks (2025) explores how Graeco-Roman sculptures of Venus were received and how they influenced the ideal of the 'fit' American woman's body aesthetics during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

60 Pampanay (2021).

61 *Idem*, p. 79.

her role in *Emily in Paris*. When asked which ancient sculpture she would choose for Lancôme, Leroy-Beaulieu selected The Winged Victory of Samothrace, arguing it could inspire modern women and encourage young girls to embrace freedom and independence.[62]

The symbolic reinterpretation of Ancient heroines within contemporary advertising reveals the elasticity of classical reception, where figures like The Winged Victory of Samothrace are reactivated to communicate evolving discourses on femininity and agency. The selection of other statues, such as those of Corinna, Hygieia, Hermaphrodite, and Diana, is intended to resonate with today's women, offering them examples to look up to. For instance, Corinna, a poet from Tanagra in Boeotia (6th–5th century BCE), is one of the rare female poets from ancient Greece. Although her works were critically received during the modern period, Corinna's poetry has also piqued the interest of feminist literary historians as one of the few surviving examples of ancient Greek women's literature. Scholars have shown that Corinna competed with the renowned poet Pindar, and she was even considered to have won.[63] Her example challenges our understanding of Antiquity, illustrating that women poets once held authority, much as they can today. In the Louvre and Lancôme collaboration, the statue of Corinne – created in the 19th century by Edme-François-Étienne Gois – served as inspiration for the eyeshadow palette, with her face featured prominently on the packaging. However, as Rosalind Gill has argued in her work on "post-feminist" advertising, such invocations of female empowerment often function within a framework of "empowerment sexism" – where women's apparent agency is celebrated yet remains shaped by longstanding aesthetic and ideological norms.[64] In this context, the campaign's use of statues like Corinna may offer empowering narratives on the surface, while still circulating within a Western canon that historically excluded these very identities.

The *Lancôme x Louvre Collection* not only draws on classical artworks from Antiquity but also underscores their continued relevance in shaping contemporary ideals of identity and beauty. While the campaign gestures toward women's agency and empowerment, it also delivers a message of inclusivity aimed at the LGBTQ+ community. One of the key figures featured is the Sleeping Hermaphrodite – a Roman marble copy (2nd century AD) of a lost Greek original, discov-

62 Louis (2023).

63 Snyder (1989), Thorsen (2020).

64 Gill (2008), p. 41–43.

ered in 1608 near the Baths of Diocletian. In 1619, Gian Lorenzo Bernini was commissioned to sculpt the cushion beneath the figure, adding an erotic softness that further emphasized its ambivalence. As a mythological child of Aphrodite and Hermes, Hermaphrodite[65] symbolizes the merging of male and female characteristics – an ambiguity long constrained by classical ideals of symmetry and beauty. Lancôme's decision to recontextualize this figure within a modern beauty campaign reflects a broader attempt to engage with gender diversity and fluidity. However, this gesture is best understood through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. As Butler argues, gender is not a stable identity, but a series of performed actions shaped by cultural expectations, especially those enforced by heteronormative norms.[66] From this perspective, the Hermaphrodite does not merely represent a fixed third category between male and female, but rather embodies the performative, fluid, and unstable nature of gender itself. Lancôme's appropriation of this classical figure thus operates on two levels: it visually signals inclusivity, but it also repackages non-conforming gender expression into a familiar aesthetic form – beautified, stylized, and palatable to luxury consumers. While the campaign introduces non-binary potential into its visual narrative, it does so within the confines of a classical canon historically rooted in binary and hierarchical ideals. The ambiguity of the Hermaphrodite is preserved yet simultaneously domesticated – rendered legible within a luxury framework that privileges aesthetic harmony. This tension encapsulates the broader challenge faced by such campaigns: they seek to evoke inclusivity and gender fluidity yet remain bound by the very visual and ideological systems they might otherwise hope to question. This layered engagement with gender performativity invites the question of whether such imagery can challenge classical norms – or merely recast them in contemporary packaging.

In autumn 2024, the Louvre and L'Oréal Group launched a new initiative titled "De toutes beautés!" (*In All Beauties!*),[67] presenting 108 artworks from a range of civilizations – including Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Etruscan cultures – alongside European pieces. Among them is *Portrait of Madeleine* (1800) by Marie-

65 Cantarella (2004).

66 Butler (1990).

67 https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/visitor-trails/de-toutes-beautes.

Guillemine Benoist,[68] which portrays a formerly enslaved woman within a bourgeois setting. While the inclusion of such works suggests an effort to expand representational diversity, non-white figures continue to be framed through a Eurocentric lens. Much like the 2023 Louvre x Lancôme campaign, which paired racially diverse models with Greco-Roman statues, these gestures toward inclusivity remain embedded in aesthetic codes shaped by the Western canon.

This ongoing alignment of beauty branding with classical art reveals how ancient ideals – particularly those inherited from Greece and Rome – continue to shape contemporary visual culture. The Louvre x Lancôme collaboration exemplifies the dual role of classical Antiquity in luxury marketing: as both a legitimizing reference and a malleable aesthetic tool. Figures such as the Venus de Milo, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and the Sleeping Hermaphrodite are not only recontextualized to embody contemporary values like empowerment and inclusivity but also flattened within a visual language that privileges whiteness. As Judith Butler and Rosalind Gill remind us, representations of gender and empowerment in visual culture often reproduce the very norms they claim to subvert.

Though Greek art supplies the ideological template for beauty and ideal form, it is through Roman material legacy – its copies, inscriptions, and imperial motifs – that these ideals were preserved and disseminated. The campaign's use of Latin terms and Roman sculptures reinforces how both Greek and Roman traditions continue to authorize aesthetic legitimacy. Yet, despite the campaign's claims to inclusivity, its representations remain tethered to Western artistic hierarchies and consumer logics.

Ultimately, the Louvre x Lancôme collaboration performs a careful balancing act: homage and reinvention. But while it gestures toward diversity, it does so within the safe boundaries of classical imagery – suggesting that true inclusivity in beauty marketing may still be limited by the very canons it seeks to challenge.

68 Bishop (2019). For the painting, see https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010065532 (accessed 18 March 2026).

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Little Caesars

Roman History in Gangster Films

Abstract Gangster films contain several references to ancient Rome. In the historical reality of the Italian-American Mafia, at least one mobster, Salvatore Maranzano, was fascinated by ancient Rome and used it as a model for his gang. In 1931, the same year Maranzano was killed, Mervyn LeRoy's film "Little Caesar" connected, although mainly through its title, a fictional gangster's ambition with an iconic historical figure from ancient Rome. An articulate reflection on how the Mafia was inspired by Roman history first appeared in Francis Ford Coppola's "The Godfather: Part II" (1974). As suggested by a dialogue from the film, the main reason for the presence of notions regarding ancient Rome in gangster cinema is that Roman history provided images of power and successful military organisation. The representation of the Mafia as an association that respects a code of honour, although a twisted one, declined after the first two "Godfather" films. This provoked the disappearance of references to honourable examples from the ancient past in later gangster films. Ancient Rome is frequently mentioned only in the television series "The Sopranos" (1999–2007). However, these references are mainly meant to ridicule the Italian-American Mafia's ill-conceived ideas of honour and masculinity.

Keywords Gangster Films, "Little Caesar", Roman Army, Roman Suicide, "The Godfather: Part II".

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INTRODUCTION*

Ancient Rome provided social and behavioural models throughout modern and contemporary history. It did so even in subversive and criminal contexts, such as the Italian-American Mafia. This paper occasionally analyses the use of Roman history in the real-life Mafia, but primarily focuses on the fiction (especially films) inspired by it.

Although there are several references to Roman history in gangster films, their significance has previously been overlooked. Why was ancient Rome so important in gangster cinema? It should be asked whether Roman history was known in the real-life Italian-American Mafia in the 20th century, to what extent the image of Rome inspired gangster films, and what ancient Rome meant for the film-makers and screenwriters who created those films.

1. EARLY GANGSTER CINEMA: "LITTLE CAESAR"

Gangster films originated in the USA in the 1910s. The 1920s saw a rise in their popularity, before they enjoyed a boom in the USA in the 1930s.[1] This trend was inspired by the contemporary emergence (particularly evident in the 1920s and 1930s) of the Italian-American Mafia. The golden age of this film genre soon came to an end: from the late 1930s onwards, fewer and fewer gangster films were produced.[2]

In early gangster films, there are a few references to ancient Rome; these references probably derive from general knowledge of the most famous aspects of Roman history in popular culture at that time. For example, in "The Penalty" (dir. Wallace Worsley, 1920), the protagonist, a crime boss played by Lon Chaney, expresses his desire to obtain "the pleasures of a Nero and the powers of a Caesar"

* This article has greatly benefited from suggestions by anonymous reviewers.

1 For the early gangster films in the 1910s and 1920s, see Mason (2002) 1–5; McCarty (2004) 13–25; Phillips (2014) 1–6. David W. Griffith's short "The Musketeers of Pig Alley" (1912) is considered to be the very first gangster film. See Phillips (2014) 1. However, Wallace McCutcheon's "The Black Hand" (1906) should also be mentioned.

2 Silver (2007); Phillips (2014) 88.

and to "be a Caesar".[3] In "Underworld" (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1927), the main character, a gangster, is compared to "Attila, the Hun, at the gates of Rome".[4]

However, the most explicit example of the use of Roman history in gangster cinema is represented by "Little Caesar" (1931), an American Pre-Code film directed by Mervyn LeRoy. The film is an adaptation of the 1929 novel of the same title by William R. Burnett and is one of the three ground-breaking American gangster films of the early 1930s, along with William A. Wellman's "The Public Enemy" (1931) and Howard Hawks' "Scarface" (1932).[5] The film by LeRoy is the story of the rapid rise and fall of Caesar Enrico "Rico" Bandello, nicknamed "Little Caesar" (played by Edward G. Robinson), an ambitious and merciless gangster whose only weakness is his morbid attachment to his best friend. This weakness ultimately provokes his defeat by the police force and his death.

However, the influence of ancient Rome is more evident in the title than in the content of the novel and the film. Both works lack any reference to Julius Caesar or Roman history in general.[6] The allusion to Caesar in the title of the film and in Rico Bandello's nickname is commonplace and is not further elaborated upon. The name "Caesar" only seems to suggest a vague idea of ambition and power. The adjective "Little" reminds us that, in the end, Rico is only a small-time criminal. In any case, the use of the epithet "Caesar" is noteworthy because it indicates that Julius Caesar was an iconic historical figure in American popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s.

In a 1958 foreword to the novel, American writer Gilbert Seldes offers an interpretation of the presence of Caesar in the title. He believes that the reference is not to Julius Caesar but to Cesare Borgia:

> This opulence is the appearance, not the reality, of power. But it is aptly chosen. It precisely defines the character of the book. Here are people who live flamboyantly, moving with a retinue of servants, spending lavishly, laughing more loudly at crueller jests, running faster, eating more – doing everything in excess of the average, being immoderate, going beyond all bounds in everything. And where do we

3 Title cards at 18:34 and 1:17:45. See McCarty (2004) 48.

4 Title card at 14:49. See McCarty (2004) 70. For this film, see Phillips (2014) 4–6.

5 Phillips (2014) 7–18.

6 Mervyn LeRoy would direct a well-known film version of Henryk Sienkiewicz's "Quo Vadis" in 1951, in which Peter Ustinov played the role of Emperor Nero. However, "Little Caesar" does not seem to anticipate LeRoy's later take on ancient Rome.

> meet their parallels in the past? Not in ancient Rome, not even in its declining days, but in the degradation of the Renaissance. It is not after the Emperor Caesars (*sic*) that this book is truly named, but after the Borgia's Cesare – degenerate and vile.[7]

There is, however, an implicit influence of Roman history, and of Julius Caesar in particular, on both the novel and the film.[8] "Little Caesar" was the nickname of Salvatore Maranzano, an Italian-American gangster renowned for his role in the "Castellammarese War", a mob war that was fought in New York City from 1930 to 1931.[9] It ended when Maranzano had his rival, Joe Masseria, killed in 1931. Maranzano, in turn, was shortly after stabbed and shot to death in that same year by order of Charles "Lucky" Luciano. During his short rule, however, Maranzano was acknowledged as the "capo di tutti i capi" ("boss of all bosses") and established an organisation for the Five Families in New York City. He was very fond of Roman history (which was probably the reason for his nickname) and planned to model his criminal organisation after the Roman army.[10]

This hoodlum was "a well-educated former seminarian" who "kept a substantial library of books about ancient Rome" and was especially fascinated by Julius Caesar.[11] Knowledge of Roman history was not surprising, even in the likes of Salvatore Maranzano. At that time, Roman history was a primary model both for American society and culture (as it had been since the 18th century) and for Italy.[12]Maranzano had moved from Sicily to New York City as an adult in the 1920s.[13] Since he had studied in Italy to become a priest, it can be assumed that

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7 Burnett (1958) 10. The history of the Borgia family also influenced the plot of Howard Hawks' "Scarface"; see Mason (2002) 28; Sarris (2007). Meanwhile, Kaminsky (2007) sees parallels between Julius Caesar's rise to power and that of Rico Bandello.

8 Needless to say, Julius Caesar was and still is more renowned in popular culture than Cesare Borgia, so it seems easier that the reference was to Julius Caesar rather than the other historical figure. The former had already been mentioned, e.g. in "The Penalty" (1920); see above.

9 For his nickname, see Guillen (2007) 312; Wyke (2012) 119.

10 Wyke (2012) 119. In fiction, the killing of Masseria by order of Maranzano and Maranzano's own death are recreated in the fifth season (2014) of the HBO television series "Boardwalk Empire", where Maranzano's interest in ancient Rome is also highlighted.

11 Wyke (2012) 119.

12 For the reception of ancient Rome in the history of the USA, see Malamud (2009).

13 Wyke (2012) 119.

he had at least a primary education (which was obligatory in Italy at that time).[14] The classical world was central to the Italian school system in the decades following the unification of the country in 1861.[15]

The nickname of Salvatore Maranzano, who was killed in 1931, probably inspired the title of the "Little Caesar" book (1929) and film (1931). However, Rico Bandello was probably based mainly on Al Capone, who was convicted in 1931.[16]

In sum, the first attested connection between gangsterism and Roman history was due to the images of power and military organisation provided by the latter. Another possible reason for mentions of ancient Rome in the context of the Italian-American Mafia is the (extremely loose) connection between gangsters of Italian origin and the ancient Romans, who had once occupied the Italian peninsula.

In the following years, there were few equally explicit references to Roman history in gangster films. Maria Wyke mentions "High School Caesar", a 1960 American film about juvenile delinquency.[17] Another film whose title recalled "Little Caesar" appeared in 1973: the American blaxploitation film "Black Caesar" by Larry Cohen, a very loose remake of the 1931 film.[18]

In the real-life Mafia, however, there seem to have been other individuals nicknamed "Caesar" or "Little Caesar" in later years, such as two minor mobsters, Joe "Little Caesar" Roma (1895–1933) and Joseph "Caesar" DiVarco (1911–1986).[19]

The nicknames of these two last "Caesars" were probably inspired by the 1931 film rather than by an unlikely remembrance of the unsuccessful gangster Salvatore Maranzano. After all, gangsters did watch films: John Dillinger was killed

14 The "Legge Casati" (Gabrio Casati's Law) of 1859 and its following additions and modifications had made primary education compulsory in Italy.

15 Bruni (2005) 25–47; Baldo (2012).

16 McCarty (2004) 116; Kaminsky (2007); Wyke (2012) 120; Phillips (2014) 7. Pfeiffer (2023) has a different opinion: "Although it was speculated that the Rico character was based on Al Capone, no hard evidence exists to support the claim". However, Al Capone's negative notoriety at that time made him an easy source of inspiration for "Little Caesar". Al Capone also heavily inspired Tony Camonte, the protagonist of Howard Hawks' "Scarface" (1932): see McCarty (2004) 120; Kaminsky (2007).

17 Wyke (2012) 120.

18 Mason (2002) 138.

19 Life (1958) 16; Find a Grave (2008).

by the police in 1934 in front of the cinema where he had just watched the crime film "Manhattan Melodrama", whereas "Crazy Joe" Gallo (killed in 1972) cherished Richard Widmark's role as a villain in the film noir "Kiss of Death" (1947).[20]

2. "DON'T WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING, FRANKIE FIVE-ANGELS"

In the 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola's first and second Godfather films (1972 and 1974) represented a triumphal revival of the pre-war gangster cinema of the USA. Coppola's interest in ancient Rome, which has become fully evident in his recent film "Megalopolis" (2024), was already apparent in "The Godfather: Part II".[21]

Towards the end of "Part II", Michael, the boss of the Corleone crime family, settles the score with the people who have defied him throughout the film. One of the individuals he has to deal with is Frank Pentangeli (nicknamed "Frankie Five-Angels"), a member of the Corleone family who has betrayed him by testifying against him at a Senate hearing. Although he has withdrawn all charges, having ultimately bowed to the rule of *omertà*, he must still pay for his initial disloyalty. Thus, Michael Corleone sends his lawyer, Tom Hagen, to exact his punishment. The following conversation ensues in Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's screenplay:

> HAGEN
> Frankie, you were always interested in politics, in history. I remember you talking about Hitler back in '43. We were young then.
>
> PENTANGELI
> Yeah, I still read a lot. They bring me stuff.

20 Life (1963) 21; FBI (2009). See McCarty (2004) 241–242 for the influence of gangster films on real-life gangsters. See Miklitsch (2020) and Killeen (2022) 45 for the interaction between film noir and gangster cinema, of which "Kiss of Death" is an example.

21 "Megalopolis" reimagines some events of Roman history (especially of the late Republican period) in modern America and reflects on the possible decline of the USA through the historical decline of Roman power.

HAGEN
You were around the old timers who dreamed up how the Families should be organized, how they based it on the old Roman legions, and called them 'regimes' … with the 'capos' and 'soldiers,' and it worked.

PENTANGELI
Yeah, it worked. Those were great old days. We was (*sic*) like the Roman Empire. The Corleone family was like the Roman Empire.

HAGEN
Yeah, it was once. The Roman Empire … when a plot against the Emperor failed, the plotters were always given a chance to let their families keep their fortunes.

PENTANGELI
Yeah, but only the rich guys. The little guys got knocked off. If they got arrested and executed, all their estate went to the Emperor. If they just went home and killed themselves, up front, nothing happened.

HAGEN
Yeah, that was a good break. A nice deal.

PENTANGELI
They went home and sat in a hot bath and opened their veins, and bled to death. Sometimes they gave a little party before they did it.

HAGEN
Don't worry about anything, Frankie Five-Angels.

PENTANGELI
Thanks, Tom. Thanks.[22]

Thus, Hagen subtly induces Pentangeli to commit suicide to pay for his betrayal against the "Emperor", Michael Corleone. Pentangeli kills himself by opening

22 3:02:00–3:04:25. The dialogue in the film shows some minor changes from the original screenplay: see Puzo/Coppola (2020), Scene 9. These changes, however, do not affect the reflections that follow in this paper. For this dialogue, see Phillips (2014) 104.

his veins soon after that conversation. It is shown here that Frank is erudite in Roman history. Fellow mobsters in the Corleone family were also interested in the military aspects of ancient Rome. They used that model to make the crime family grow: "You were around the old timers who dreamed up how the Families should be organized, how they based it on the old Roman legions, and called them 'regimes' … with the 'capos' and 'soldiers,' and it worked".

Pentangeli displays a sweeping knowledge of politics and history. Adolf Hitler appears, along with Roman history, as an object of interest of the gangster. Although it is not specified whether the mobster loathed or admired the dictator, this collateral interest in Nazi Germany seems to suggest that he was mainly interested in the brutal aspect of domination. Roman history appears here, as elsewhere, as a source of images of power.

The idea that Roman legions were structured in "'regimes' … with the 'capos' and 'soldiers'" is a blatant distortion of Roman military history. Still, it is true that the Sicilian Mafia has a military, pyramidal organisation, with a boss commanding his subordinates, who lead their own minions, unlike other criminal associations, where bosses operate within a context of families competing at a horizontal level.[23] The screenwriters of "The Godfather: Part II", Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, were certainly aware of this specificity of the Sicilian mob and sketched a reflection on this aspect by two fictional insiders of the Mafia, Pentangeli and Hagen. The idea that mobsters could conceive the Mafia as similar to the Roman army is entirely plausible, as shown by the story of Salvatore Maranzano.

The biography of Maranzano, who cherished Roman history and attempted to model his criminal organisation after the Roman army, may have served as a reference for this part of the screenplay. However, Pentangeli, who testifies against Michael Corleone, is primarily based on the historical figure of Joe Valachi, the first *mafioso* who, in 1963, publicly acknowledged the existence of *Cosa Nostra.*[24]

After the first two "Godfather" films, few references to the ancient world appeared in gangster films. One example is perhaps the interior decorations of

23 Sciarrone/Storti (2014).

24 As mentioned in the audio commentary by Francis Ford Coppola: see Coppola (2025), at 2:26:50. See also Nourmand (2007) 120. The historical character, Salvatore Maranzano, briefly appears, in a fictional context, in the novel on which the first two "Godfather" films are based, Mario Puzo's "The Godfather" (1969). See Puzo (2019) 204–207.

the gangster Tony Montana's mansion in Brian De Palma's "Scarface" (1983).[25] In the hall of the mansion, Pompeian red is the predominant colour; classical statues and ancient Roman mural paintings also appear. The reconstruction of a Roman villa in Miami in the 1980s is consistent with Tony Montana's larger-than-life behaviour and tasteless lifestyle.[26] Interestingly, the fictional mobster's kitsch taste has been imitated by real-life gangsters. The hall of *Camorra* boss Walter Schiavone's villa near Caserta (Campania) was identical to that of Tony Montana's mansion.[27] Again, images from ancient Rome, due to their antiquity and prestige, were used to support fictional and real gangsters' hunger for power and glory.

3. THE CHILDREN OF SCORSESE: FILMS AND TELEVISION SERIES OF THE 1990S AND 2000S

Martin Scorsese's film "Goodfellas" (1990) initiated a new wave of gangster films that were characterised by a hyperrealistic portrayal of the Mafia.[28] In 1994, Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction" was even more radical in transforming gangster life into pop, postmodern material. In gangster films made in the USA in the 1990s, the tragic and somewhat dignified attitude of Coppola's gangsters is replaced by the idiosyncrasies of small-time criminals. On the one hand, these characters are greedier, crueller, and more vicious than the members of the Corleone crime family; on the other hand, they appear ridiculous in their

25 De Palma's film is a remake of Howard Hawks' "Scarface" (1932).

26 In the same film, there is at least another reference to the classical world, that is, a night-club called "Babylon Club", which is inspired by the Erechtheum. See Corliss (1983), quoted in Bogue (2007).

27 Saviano (2007) 246. The influence of cinema on *Camorra* bosses is amply analysed *ibid.*, 244–258; see also Renga (2013) 145–146; Massaro (2015) 12–13. Schiavone's villa has been confiscated by the Italian government. It is featured in a scene of Matteo Garrone's film "Gomorrah" (original Italian title: "Gomorra"), where two young aspiring *Camorra* gangsters, obsessed with De Palma's "Scarface", quote Tony Montana and imitate his attitude.

28 "Goodfellas" was followed by Scorsese's similar-themed "Casino" (1995). For the American gangster films of the early 1990s, see Hildenbrand (2019).

mundane lives and hollow conversations.[29] Unlike Frank Pentangeli, they do not try to model their existence after grand images from the past. Instead, their worldview is based on the popular culture of their own time.

Therefore, references to Roman history are lacking from gangster films of the 1990s. However, there are references to it in a television series that expands on and reimagines many aspects of Scorsese's films, "The Sopranos" (HBO, 1999–2007).[30] In that series, allusions to ancient Rome are highly ironic. They are also second-hand, as mobsters from "The Sopranos" are not well-educated but are familiar with pop culture and references to Roman history in pop culture.[31]

This television series has at least two significant references to Roman history.[32] The protagonist of the series, Tony Soprano, tries to force Ariel, a Hasidic Jew, out of a contract with violence. As Ariel points out that his situation is similar to that of the Jews who resisted the ancient Romans at Masada in 72–73 CE, and asks where the Romans are now, Tony answers that he is "looking at them":

> ARIEL
> You ever heard of the Masada? For two years, 900 Jews held their own against 15,000 Roman soldiers. They chose death before enslavement. The Romans? Where are they now?
>
> TONY
> You're looking at them, asshole.

After threatening Ariel with even greater violence, Tony gets what he wants.[33] Ancient Rome, although known superficially, is used by the mobster to support his professed strength and masculinity.

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29 Hildenbrand (2019) 133.

30 Interestingly, in those same years, HBO and the BBC also produced a television series on Rome between the time of Julius Caesar and Augustus, "Rome" (2005–2007). For this series, see Cyrino (2008 and 2015).

31 See McCarty (2004) 246 for the love of cinema shown by the characters of this television series.

32 In addition to other minor references, like the title of the sixth episode of the first season, "Pax Soprana".

33 Season 1, episode 3. The episode, titled "Denial, Anger, Acceptance", first aired in the USA on January 24, 1999.

Another reference to Roman history in "The Sopranos" has obvious connections to popular culture and to a specific film. Ralph Cifaretto, a sociopathic *capo,* is obsessed with "Gladiator", the successful 2000 film by Ridley Scott that relaunched the epic film genre set in ancient Rome.[34] Other than mentioning the film several times, Cifaretto wounds a subordinate in a botched attempt to imitate the moves of Maximus Decimus Meridius, the protagonist of Scott's film. In addition, he is seen watching Stanley Kubrick's "Spartacus" (1960), which he wholeheartedly dislikes due to the anachronistic haircut of the protagonist, played by Kirk Douglas.[35] In these and other cases, the generally Scorsesean TV series appears to be more Tarantinoesque, as Tarantino's films introduced gangsters who are fond of watching films and television.

The meaning of the use of "Gladiator" in scenes involving Ralph Cifaretto is basically a reflection on masculinity. Cifaretto is a violent hoodlum who, in a crucial scene, kills his mistress. In other scenes, he beats men and kills animals as well. His enthusiasm for the "Gladiator" film reflects his search for strong, masculine models in his misogynistic, amoral, and sleazy life. Identifying a role model in a fictional character from the Roman Empire does not derive, in this case, from having a classical education but rather from watching a box-office hit.[36]

34 Interestingly, the scene in "Gladiator" where Commodus demands loyalty from his subordinates after the death of Marcus Aurelius was inspired by "The Godfather," as acknowledged by Ridley Scott: see Cotta Ramosino/Cotta Ramosino/Dognini (2004) 131. In Scott's sequel, "Gladiator II" (2024), the villain, played by Denzel Washington, has all the characteristics of a gangster. The influence of gangster cinema on films set in classical antiquity would require a separate paper.

35 The scenes that involve Cifaretto's enthusiasm for "Gladiator" are from "The Sopranos", season 3, episodes 4–6.

36 Ancient Rome was and still is a constant source of images of personal and political power. Elon Musk's use of Roman imperial myths (including the most dangerous, modern distortion of Roman history, the so-called Roman salute, also lately made by Steve Bannon) is a recent example of this attitude. See Agbamu (2025); for the Roman salute, see Winkler (2009). The recent "How often do you think about the Roman Empire?" internet trend showed that ancient Rome still represents a myth of power and masculinity, especially amongst men: see Murray (2023).

CONCLUSIONS

Ancient Rome was used, both in films and in the real-life Mafia, to strengthen one's confidence in his brutal force and as a model to structure a criminal organisation with military aspects, which is an actual characteristic of the Sicilian Mafia.

An erudite enthusiasm for ancient Rome characterised the historical "capo di tutti i capi" Salvatore Maranzano and the fictional character Frank Pentangeli. Tony Montana's relationship with Antiquity is even crasser than that of Maranzano and Pentangeli. The decorations of his mansion aim to flaunt a vague idea of wealth, power, and prestige. In recent fiction, especially in "The Sopranos", allusions to ancient Rome are second-hand and mostly derive from pop culture.

References to ancient Rome in this TV series highlight how Roman history has the potential to reinforce images of power and masculinity. However, the irony with which the TV series treats mobsters' self-identification with ancient Romans successfully disarms their delusions of grandeur.

It is essential to ensure that ancient Rome is not a source of dangerous myths of power, as it often was in the past. Irony, combined with a thorough historical analysis of all aspects of ancient Rome – including those frequently overlooked by those who draw on Rome as a symbol of power – can effectively challenge malicious misinterpretations of Roman history.

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Oedipus and the Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza) at a crossroads

Abstract In Italy, classical dramas have been considered for centuries more as mere texts, rather than scripts born to be performed. They may also be perceived as 'sacred' monuments of the past, as well as historical theatres, which need to be protected from the flow of time and its consequences. A significant example is the first documented production of a Greek Drama in modern Italy: *Edipo Tiranno,* at the Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, in 1585. The building itself is an extraordinary document of self-celebration conceived by the Accademia Olimpica, who sponsored the theatre and aimed at gaining a primary role through the parenetic use of classical tragedy and mythology.

The paper retraces the complex process which led to the building, and to the inaugural performance. A difficult choice emerged regarding the type of drama that would be performed: an ancient play, or a brand-new drama? The final choice was to follow the authority of Aristotle's *Poetics,* and to perform an Italian translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex.* The chronicles of the performance reveal a conservative approach which encapsulates the aims of the Accademia. Moreover, a few relevant issues of this case-study may be found in the history of Italian classical reception. Recently, the latest two seasons of the Teatro Olimpico (2024–2025) marked a turning point, as shown in the final part of the paper.

Keywords Teatro Olimpico; Vicenza; Palladio; *Oedipus Rex*; Accademia Olimpica

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PROLOGOS[1]

In 1585, the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, first designed by the architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), sponsored by the local Accademia Olimpica, was completed by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616). On 3rd March 1585, it was inaugurated with a magnificent performance of *Edipo Tiranno,* an Italian version of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* by Orsatto Giustiniani. It is possibly the first performance of a Greek tragedy in the Italian Renaissance, and by far the best documented: we can rely on the recorded minutes of sessions and debates of the Accademia, on chronicles and letters written by spectators, on sketches of costumes and sets, on stage directions by the director Angelo Ingegneri.[2] Moreover, by a stroke of luck, the choral music of *Edipo Tiranno* (by Andrea Gabrieli) and the original sets by Scamozzi (usually removed or destroyed at the end of a production) have been preserved too. The wooden perspectives created for the inaugural performance are still the most surprising feature of the Teatro Olimpico: "the oldest covered theatre in the world".[3]

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1 This paper is partly based on previous essays (for details see the bibliography) about the Teatro Olimpico, where I worked in the Nineties with Maurizio Scaparro, who was artistic director of the Teatro Olimpico. Sadly, he passed away on 17 February 2023. My paper is dedicated to his memory. Since1993, I have been studying the building and its history: I have compared its specific features, and the productions hosted there, with other similar festivals in Italy, mostly in archaeological sites and historical theatres. Recently, on this subject, I presented a paper entitled *The Italian "original sin": the first Oedipus at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza* (1585), at the international conference *Memory and Performance: Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals* (15th–18th Century), UCL London 23–24 February 2023. I thank the organizers, especially Giovanna Di Martino, the reviewers, Anastasia Bakogianni, Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Janet Cox, Wendy Lloyd, Juliet Murphy, Roberto Puggioni, Anna Beltrametti, Umberto Curi, and Marco Martinelli.

2 For a general overview on Palladio, and his works, see Tavernor (1991), Ackerman (1993), (2015) and (2016), Puppi (1973) and (2018), Beltramini-Burns (2008), Ulmer (2018), Paternò (2018) On the Teatro Olimpico and its history, see Barbieri (1974), Oosting (1981), Avagnina (1990) and (1992), Magagnato (1951) and (1992), Puppi (2013), Calza (2025). About the inaugural performance (1585) see Puppi (1962), Gallo (1973), Vidal-Naquet (1981), Flashar (1991), Mazzoni (1992), (1998) and (2013), Migliarisi (2013). See also Treu (1997a) 12–16, Treu (2004), (2007), (2012), and (2013).

3 See https://www.comune.vicenza.it/cittadino/scheda.php/42724,177960. See also https://www.electa.it/prodotto/le-theatre-olympique-de-vicence/ (last accessed 2 January 2026).

A 'mythical' aura surrounds this exceptional building, born under the authority of 'tradition', and the performance of Vicenza's first *Oedipus*. Since the *première,* the Teatro Olimpico and the Sophoclean tragedy have been tied together by a common destiny. In more than four centuries, many different versions of Oedipus' story have been performed on stage in the Palladian theatre (see Nogara, 1972, Stefani 1992 and 1997). The first production of an ancient Greek tragedy at the Teatro Olimpico is both significant and symptomatic of a specific context (Vicenza), but also indicative of a general trend in the history of classical reception. Some of the major characteristics of that first performance, and the history of this theatre, recur also in modern productions, not only of classical plays, in the same theatre, as well as at other Italian festivals.

Historical sites are often perceived by their audience as a local treasure, a monument to be preserved at all costs. The past is idealized, the glorious buildings of Greek and Roman Italy are seen as tangible signs of the modern nation's classical roots, and frequently evoked, in order to justify the choices made afterwards: not only in Vicenza, but all over Italy. This conservative attitude has taken root in Italian audiences: personally, I consider it the 'original sin' of our national culture, recalling the ancient concept of *hamartia,* so central in *Oedipus Rex*. Such a phenomenon could be observed in the chronicles of the performances at the Teatro Olimpico, both in the audience and in the committee in charge of the organization.

In what follows, I recount the story of the Teatro Olimpico, its sponsor (the Accademia Olimpica), the path which led to its inaugural performance, with the aim of illuminating the complex relationship between the theatre, its audience and context (the town of Vicenza and the region Veneto), the classical past and the present. Secondly, I examine the most significant features of the first performance (1585), including those which recur afterwards, reflecting mostly conservative choices. Thirdly, I consider a few modern examples of recent receptions. Finally, I offer a brief account of the latest two seasons of Olimpico Classical Festival (2024–2025), directed by Ermanna Montanari and Marco Martinelli, founders of an Italian theatre company, Teatro delle Albe (Ravenna) who have worked in many theatres and historical sites in Italy and abroad (regarding their latest international projects see Bortoletti & Donati 2025). They brought to Vicenza their thirty-year experience and their personal concept of theatre as a collective rite. They not only invited and hosted well-known artists from Italy and abroad, but they also involved the people of Vicenza in their productions with "public calls" ("chiamate pubbliche") open to all citizens.

My paper aims to recall first the 'ideal classicism' of the building, its connec-

tion with the historical context of Vicenza, its five-century story in search of an 'impossible' balance between the past and the present (a mission shared with other historical theatres), as shown through selected case-studies. The Teatro Olimpico, an important part of Italian national heritage, for many centuries has been considered more as a museum, or a monument, than a real theatre, specifically designed to host performances. In 2024/2025, the new artistic directors called it their 'home' and used it, according to Palladio's stated purpose – as he first conceived it – as a unique stage for classics: an ideal birthplace of creative ideas, collective experiences, unique events and performances.

A TOWN IN SEARCH OF A HERO

In the sixteenth century, Vicenza was a rich town, with a lively middle class, and a few noble families, but in political terms it was a mere satellite of Venice.[4] The *élite,* which included landowners, *nouveau riches,* and merchants, practiced literature and arts as amateurs, and funded local artists. One important figure was Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478–1550), a playwright inspired by the classics (he wrote the first 'classical' tragedy in Italian language, *Sofonisba,* in 1515). He founded the Accademia Trissiniana, and he was interested in architecture theory.[5] In 1538, he first met Andrea di Pietro della Gondola, the son of a miller whose talent struck Trissino. He became Andrea's mentor, he gave him a significant surname, Palladio, with multiple meanings: in his intentions, it recalled a character – an angel/protector – from Trissino's historical poem *L'Italia liberata dai Goti*; but the etymology, of course, dates to the Greek Goddess Pallas Athena, and her wooden statue which served as a talisman. Therefore, Palladio was given an auspicious nickname, which would bring luck to the architect and his mentor.

Thanks to Trissino, Palladio went to Rome on two study trips. He took inspiration from Vitruvius' books and from ancient monuments: after *Antiquities of Rome* (1534) and *Churches of Rome* (1554), he published his *Four Books on Archi-*

4 Vidal-Naquet called Vicenza "ghost of a city", "un fantôme de cité": Vidal-Naquet (1981) 8 and note 14. See also Battilotti (1980), Olivieri (1981), Chastel-Cevese (1990) 14–22, Zaupa (1990), Guidarelli (2016), Johnson (2018).

5 On Trissino, see Morsolin (1878) and Pozza (1980).

tecture (Palladio 1570) which became a "Bible" of modern architecture.[6] The authority of antiquity became the trademark of all his creations. He freely adapted classical models to the needs and forms of his times: palaces and country villas, churches (such as the magnificent three – San Giorgio, Redentore and Zitelle – on the Giudecca Island, in Venice), and civic buildings like the municipal 'Basilica' of Vicenza. His works marked a turning point in the history of reception, of theatre, of architecture, and his influence expanded abroad through the Anglo-Palladian movement that flourished in the eighteenth century.[7]

Palladio, despite his humble origins, was the perfect architect for the aristocratical *élites* of Veneto and Vicenza in particular: they saw themselves as heirs of the noble men of the past, in search of a new tangible form of *kalokagathìa,* where ethical and aesthetical aspirations could meet. In Vicenza, many rich and noble citizens were members of the Accademia Olimpica (founded in 1555) whose very name betrays its scope. As a cultural élite of well-educated, noble, and rich men, they laid claim to an ideal connection with their noble ancestors in Ancient Greece and Rome, and they wanted to give Vicenza a cultural prominence among Italian cities. Through Palladio, they aimed at improving their status and gaining more independence, at least in cultural matters if not in political terms (Ranzolin, 1989).

Previously, dramas were usually performed in palaces, courtyards, or public spaces (such as Trissino's *Sofonisba* in the Basilica), but the city lacked a real theatre. It was quite possibly Palladio himself who brought this matter to the attention of the Academicians (see Puppi 2013). He suggested to them that they should build a new theatre, inspired by classical models, as a monument to posterity.

Unfortunately, Palladio died in August 1580, well before the theatre was built. Another architect, Vincenzo Scamozzi, had to complete it. To see how the project changed, over the years, it is worth analysing the documents in the archives of the Accademia (a selection was published by Gallo in 1973 and Mazzoni in 1998, 225–248). As Mazzoni showed (see Mazzoni 1992, 154–308 and 2013) the doc-

6 See Cellauro (2017), Patetta (2020) and Canali (2021). Palladio was also interested in other ancient authors: for instance, he wrote a book on Julius Caesar (*Commentarii di Giulio Cesare,* 1574–75).

7 See Sartore (2018) and (2019), Scheidel (2020). Moreover, on December 6, 2010 the US Congress approved Resolution no. 259 which officially recognized Palladio's influence on modern architecture https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hconres259/text/enr (last accessed 2 January 2026).

uments aimed to create the impression that a noble assembly of educated and rich men, united in their generous effort to build a municipal treasure.[8]

This idealized self-portrait was re-evaluated in recent studies that reveal embarrassing details, including financial troubles and controversial ideas.[9] Not every member was active, attentive, prompt, and ready to give donations as desired by the *princeps* of the Accademia, Leonardo Valmarana. To attract new donors, and to gratify the sponsors, he granted acknowledgments and rewards, proportional to the expenses incurred.[10] The claim "perpetua memoria" ("eternal memory" in Italian) was at the core of the entire operation (Mazzoni 1998, 36 and 2013).

The members of this academy were portrayed, partly in the magnificent scene which dominates the main stage, partly in the colonnade of the *cavea,* above the audience. Thus, they were 'incorporated' into the theatre building itself, as a monument for posterity; first in life, and then in death (it is not by chance that the Teatro Olimpico later hosted commemorations, and funeral orations, dedicated to some of its most famous members).[11] Finally, the theatre was completed, but it required more money, effort and time than originally planned.

The path which led to the first performance was no less long and troubled. Not only literary and poetic, but also political issues were at stake. The aspirations of the Accademia were counter-balanced by personal interests, jealousy, envy, and frustration. The rivalry between members prevented them from staging a new drama, either entirely modern or based on classical models, written by one of them, by their friends, relatives, colleagues, or allies. Some members initially planned to stage a 'pastorale' (such as Fabio Pace's *Eugenio*[12]). Meanwhile,

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8 See Gordon (1966) 161–191.

9 As Mazzoni points out, the Academicians concealed details that would spoil the idealized picture of the inaugural show: see Mazzoni (1992) and (1998) especially chapter 2: 13–50 and chapter 5: 87–152.

10 For a survey on the *coregìa* and other forms of sponsorship in ancient and modern communities, see Besana/Esposito/Treu (2018).

11 In Mazzoni's words, the majestic "theatre of the world" became "a great theatre of death": Mazzoni (1998) 25. For a detailed analysis of the statues see Avagnina (1992) 85–127. About Valmarana see Gordon (1966) 174–187 and Mazzoni (2013).

12 See Chiabò – Doglio (1985) and (1992) about the genre named 'pastorale' including various types of dramas and musical compositions with pastoral characters and fabulous plots, frequently set in an idealized countryside.

modern and 'fancy' dramas claimed the stage, including experiments of mixed genres (in the years leading up to the inaugural performance, the poet and playwright Battista Guarini was writing *Il pastor fido*: see below). As an aristocratic *élite,* they had strong prejudices against professionals, actors and playwrights such the *"poeta plebeius"* Anguillara (author of a modern *Edippo*: see Guastella 2013, 260).

These complications contributed to the final choice of the text to be played: not an adaptation of an ancient drama, or a modern one, but the specific tragedy, *Oedipus Rex,* which best suited the ambitions of the Academicians, and the image they wanted to commit to posterity. Symbolically, the past won over the present.[13] In order to justify their choice, the members mention the authority of Aristotle's *Poetics*: in their interpretation, his words became a literary canon. *Oedipus rex* was viewed as a 'masterpiece' of tragedy, which at the time was considered the highest and preferred genre, more elevated than comedy, and more suitable to such a special, official occasion.

Besides these openly stated reasons, less noble, hidden ambitions played a major part: poets, and scholars of different orientation, argued hotly over which play to stage. It is difficult to know whether the Italian version of *Oedipus Rex* by Orsatto Giustiniani (*Edipo Tiranno*) was chosen for its virtues, or because he was an influent member of the Accademia, with many friends and partisans.

The selected tragedy, compared to a "pastorale" (a genre which usually does not require much stage machinery) had an immediate impact on the sets. Not a simple canvas (Attic drama's *skené*), nor a painted background (the *skenographìa* invented by Sophocles, according to tradition), nor imitations of the Hellenistic and Roman decors were attempted. The story of the tragedy itself, set in Thebes, led to a unique solution: Vincenzo Scamozzi designed a prospective, artificial landscape of wooden sets representing – ideally – the streets and gates of an ancient Greek city.[14]

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13 The impact of this choice should be calculated not only in the short term, but also for its long-term consequences, as Vicenza's example had wide-ranging effects: other productions followed, other theatres were built, for example, the "Teatro all'Antica" (1588–1590) designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi in Sabbioneta (Mantua).

14 See Vidal-Naquet (1981) 8 for a comparison between Giustiniani's text and the inaugural performance. About Scamozzi see Barbieri-Beltramini (2003), Mazzoni (1992), (1998), (2013), Hopkins (2019).

To build them, the Academicians needed to acquire a new portion of land and spend a considerable amount of money. Their desire for self-celebration grew proportionally with the delay in building the theatre, and its mounting costs. In the final version, the audience could see the gates of Thebes, and behind them three streets in perspective, surrounded by palaces which recalled those of Vicenza, many of which belonged to the Academicians themselves.

The identification between the ancient and modern cities is complete: Vicenza *becomes* Thebes and vice versa. The result is a complex creation, which produced an effective illusion by combining the most recent theoretical achievements with clever artificial lighting (see below for more on this). The sets were so admired that they survived, defying theatrical logic and time. Such a fragile and ephemeral element is still the most famous and celebrated part of the building. The provisional became definitive, and the internal clock of the Teatro Olimpico stopped at 1585. But paradoxes in the history of this theatre do not end there.

A PERFECT DAY

Every step of this story, including the choice of Sophocles' drama, can also be understood in 'political' terms. The building itself and the performance acquired ideological meanings, as recent studies testify. The fascination with the concept of Empire was shared by many members, in *primis* by Leonardo Valmarana. Clearly, his ideal model was the man who ruled Europe at that time: Charles V (1500–1558), King of Spain and Naples, Archduke of Austria, admired by the European elites as the heir of the Holy Roman Empire (Mazzoni 1998, 155–166). Moreover, Vicenza struggled to compete in cultural terms with other cities under the influence of Venice. In this regard, the Italian term 'tiranno' (Tyrant) chosen by Giustiniani for his title – closer to the ancient Greek, but with ambiguous nuances compared to 'Re' (King) – may have alluded to the representatives of Venice, who were hostile to the activity of the Accademia, an institution they viewed as an independent, potentially dangerous initiative. They repeatedly tried to prevent its foundation and to impede its work. In turn, the citizens of Vicenza were intolerant of the high taxes and duties imposed by Venice, nor did they like the 'podestà' Benedetto Zorzi, a governor nominated by the Venetian Republic who ruled Vicenza (he was against the performance and did not attend the *première*). Sophocles' tragedy could therefore be interpreted by the Academicians as a mirror of their own destiny. Oedipus became an exemplar of

a self-made man, with extraordinary qualities, who gained personal power over a city, and run it for years with wisdom and balance, until fate condemned him to perdition.[15]

The building and the performance are thus revealed to be more connected to one another than it might appear at first glance. The members of the Academy sat in the audience, seeing themselves mirrored in their statues, and in the characters on stage. Valmarana's portrait recalled the Emperor Charles V, in the middle of the colonnade, on the opposite side from the triumphal arc which dominates the stage, where an equestrian monument was originally placed (a clear symbol of Empire: see above, and Mazzoni 2013).

While the theatre was being completed, another important figure oversaw the inaugural performance, Angelo Ingegneri.[16] He called himself a *corago* ('director'), paying homage to the history of theatre, and legitimizing his own role. In ancient Athens, a *choregos* was a rich, private citizen who paid the chorus in a performance, like a modern sponsor (see Besana-Esposito-Treu 2018), while the *chorodidaskalos* was the chorus trainer. In ancient Rome the *choragus* had multiples functions in the performances.

Ingegneri started working on his project (*Progetto* in Italian) well before the production was set to première, and later he wrote about his experience (see respectively Ingegneri 1584? and 1598). He created his own conception of the theatrical game, considered and treated as a coherent performance, rather than a mere, heterogeneous sum of different parts. In many ways, he anticipated the outlook of a modern director; he studied the evidence about ancient performances and drew attention to the distance between the classical past and his times. He also considered the supposed "original conditions" of ancient performances. For instance, he included in his stage directions two altars where incense was burnt, in order to evoke ancient Greek rituals.[17] However, he was not a rigid imitator of Antiquity but combined a strong affinity for the classics with the desire to create something new that would last.[18]

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15 See Vidal-Naquet (1981), Mazzoni (1998), (2003) and (2013), Guastella (2012), Puppi (1973) and (2013).

16 About Ingegneri see Gallo (1973), Baldassarri (2013), Puggioni (2002) and (2012).

17 Regarding the use of incense and essence in performances see Treu (2022).

18 See Gallo (1973) for the manuscript from Ambrosiana, and the Progetto by Ingegneri (1584?) See also Vidal-Naquet (1981).

> The historical significance of the *Progetto* cannot be overestimated, for it represents the first known workbook in Western practice outlining a director's analysis and interpretation of a play and serving as the working model for the production (…) Ingegneri expanded the *Progetto* into a comprehensive two-part instructional manual on the art of directing, published in 1598, called *Della poesia rappresentativa* (Ingegneri, 1598)In it, he used *Edipo tiranno* to illustrate his theories and methodology. (…). Ingegneri's ideas in *Della poesia* are rooted in the fundamental belief in the commanding presence of the director in theatrical production (…) According to Ingegneri, every play is a complex system of parts with its own inherent logic and performative potential. The director's task is to bring that potential into relief in a harmonious stage impression.
> Migliarisi (2013), 537–8.

The director converted his practical experience into theory, and his work became a milestone in the history of modern theatre. He was skilled in the technical aspects of theatre and displayed a sensitivity towards issues of space and time. Ingegneri trained and directed a staff of nine actors, ninety-three extras and qualified technicians for the lighting and sets, and he curated all aspects of a complex machinery involving more than a hundred people. Furthermore, he personally created a design (made of coloured marbles for the stage floor), which made it easier for the chorus and the actors to follow their choreography. Also, the director refused to use masks, as they would seem unnatural to contemporary audiences. Likewise, he made limited use of choral songs - without any instruments – so that the audience could focus on the text.

Under Ingegneri's supervision, the composer Andrea Gabrieli wrote his music (*Cori per musica*), based upon the strophic structure employed by Orsatto Giustiniani. The whole production of *Edipo Tiranno* is an exceptional case-study because so many of its parts survived, including the only extant music specifically composed for a tragedy from this period.[19]

As for the wooden sets, Ingegneri wanted them to be illuminated by a complex system of artificial lights, oil lamps and mirrors, designed by Scamozzi and Antonio Pasi, an expert technician from Ferrara. Another important figure, who connected Vicenza and Ferrara, was the playwright Battista Guarini, a friend

19 First published by Giovanni Gabrieli in 1588, the choral songs are now included by Ricordi in the National critical edition of the complete works by Andrea Gabrieli (https://www.ricordi.com/it-IT/Critical-Editions/Gabrieli-Andrea-Critical-Editions.aspx. Last accessed 3 January 2026)

of Ingegneri and a member of the same Accademia degli Innominati in Parma (Mazzoni 1998, 99–103). He played an active role as a consultant, and he informed many aspects of direction, light design, casting and acting. In turn, Vicenza's experiment influenced his own work (in 1580, he started writing his masterpiece, the *Pastor Fido*, and he was still working on it when the *Edipo* was staged at Vicenza). The artist Giambattista Maganza designed the costumes. Some of his sketches are stored in the archives of Vicenza and a picture inspired by the inaugural performance, probably drawn by his son Alessandro Maganza, is still visible in the entrance hall of the Teatro Olimpico. Each main character was distinguished by a set of monochromatic colours, and was followed by a conspicuous group of supernumeraries, dressed accordingly.[20] Following Ingegneri's instructions, the design of the costumes, as well as of the sets and props, did not adhere strictly to ancient rules. Maganza found inspiration in contemporary paintings and balanced the fascination for 'exotic' antiquity with the fashion of the time.[21] He found a compromise adjusted to the tastes of a noble, rich, educated and demanding audience. As a result, the costumes could be described as 'Greekish', but to most spectators of the time they looked rather Turkish. The audience was impressed by the rich decor, and vivid colours (Mazzoni 1998, 148–152).

According to the chronicles, the audience started entering the theatre in the morning and filled it completely. They waited all day in a charming, but uncomfortable place (no fresh air, no toilets!). After a series of dedicatory speeches, the performance of *Edipo Tiranno* started in the evening and ended at eleven o'clock. Most spectators were enthralled by the festive atmosphere, and the magnificent decorations (above all, the illuminated sets). They were, however, generally con-

20 "Ingegneri's spectacular mise en scène was rendered through the distinctive costumes for each of the speaking and non-speaking roles. (…) The color scheme was monochromatic: Oedipus and Jocasta were dressed predominantly in gold; Oedipus wore a purple brocade cloak; Creon was mostly in black. The Old Priest was dressed in stark white; the children were uniformly dressed in white robes and boots and blond wigs. Tiresias was dressed in an earth-colored robe, and the Chorus stood out in robes each of a different color, but with red and blue caps that universalized the group on stage (…) The chorus served two principle dramaturgical functions, according to Ingegneri: to deliver commentary in the form of tragic odes and to intervene in the action as "good" and sympathetic citizens of Thebes (*Della poesia* 10–1). This dual function was fixed in Giustiniani's translation: two of the five odes were written to be spoken rather than sung": Migliarisi (2013) 542.

21 See Maganza's sketches and other documents in Magagnato (1992) 208–215.

servative, and took exception to most of Ingegneri's innovative solutions (not surprisingly, given the conditions which led to the performance, and the sponsor's wishes). The Academicians were far from impartial judges. Many of them were partisans on opposite sides, influenced by prejudices, jealousy, envy, or by their own views on theatre. For example, Fabio Pace, the author of the rejected *pastorale* (*Eugenio*), and Antonio Riccoboni, were both highly critical of the production (see also Pigafetta 1585). Some criticized the chorus, because its movements were not what they expected (according to their knowledge of the ancient plays). On the contrary, Ingegneri's directorial plan and other sources reveal how clever his treatment of the chorus was (he saw it as the core of the whole production). In brief, he deliberately refused to apply a conservative, if not sterile, "archaeological approach", and went in search of new solutions (Mazzoni 1998, 138–139).

TOWARDS A DIFFICULT BALANCE

Such tension between an innovative and a more conservative attitude recurs in the whole history of the Teatro Olimpico, especially among local, older, regular attendees[22]. The partisans of "old-fashioned" performances, generally, are quite suspicious – if not hostile – to novelties, adaptations, and to the very idea of updating an ancient text. This is not an isolated phenomenon, in Italian classical performance reception. Spectators and critics often reveal to be nostalgic for the 'original' conditions of ancient performances, especially when the text is staged in an ancient theatre, and/or in places which do not have a regular theatre season, but know only the intensity of a classical dramatic festival.[23] These feelings and considerations are also combined with cultural, artistic and practical con-

22 Many critics have frequently observed discordant opinions and controversial reactions, when it comes to innovations in adaptations and performances of classical dramas (Giovannelli 2014; Treu 2024c). However, in recent years, some ancient and historical theatres in Italy have slowly begun to be more accepting of innovative choices. At the same time, Italian theatre audiences have become more heterogeneous, with an increasing number of students and young people, who are more flexible, and open to experimental performances.

23 In the past, the conservative attitude of most spectators, especially in historical sites such as Vicenza or Siracusa, have influenced some directors' choices: see Nogara (1972), Stefani (1992), Giovannelli (2014) and Treu (2024c).

cerns, including the need to safeguard the monument, and with economic interests and power relations, in an explosive mixture.

Moreover, in historical sites which host ancient festivals (such as Vicenza, or Siracusa), local spectators and regular attendees often view the theatre as their 'home', i.e. a familiar, communal space. They sometimes criticize the directors' choices when they feel that they betray the supposed 'spirit of the place' (*genius loci*). In the case of Vicenza, there are also century-long traditions to be considered. For example, the social and cultural status of its patrons, an *élite,* which models itself on an idealized version of ancient Rome. For many Academicians, the Teatro Olimpico is a "temple" and so it must remain: a monument to be protected from modernity, at all costs. For conservative audience members, the best performances are supposed 'archaeological or 'philological' versions of ancient tragedies, especially the most 'classical' of them all, the *Edipo Tiranno* which inaugurated the theatre in 1585.

Since this drama was chosen by the Accademia, it left an indelible mark on the history of this theatre: the first production became an ideal model for all those that followed. This remains an issue for the organisation that manages the festival ("Spettacoli classici"), namely, the municipal Department of Culture, which has its headquarters next to the theatre. The Accademia Olimpica remains active in the same building, which reminds us of the sets created by Scamozzi, despite the passing of time. This part of the city looks like it did in the sixteenth century, if we walk to the Teatro Olimpico across the city centre, on the Roman 'high street' which still bears the name of "Corso Andrea Palladio".

Vicenza remains a prosperous city, thanks to the development of its industry and crafts. The heirs of the first Academicians still sitin the audience They are partly the remaining noble families, but also self-made men, and *nouveau riches,* willing to sponsor cultural events, and to ennoble themselves through culture.[24]

This continuity in the dominant factions of the city is reflected in the political events of the last decades. The municipal administration shapes the cultural policies of the Teatro Olimpico. Its artistic director is regularly chosen by the mayor and by the deputy in charge of theatre and cultural activities ("Assessore alla Cultura"), who inevitably consider the political and ideological orientation of the candidates. After World War Two, Vicenza has been mostly governed by a conservative majority. At first, and for a long time, the right-wing Democra-

24 Many families have remained in the area, as confirmed by the continuity of their surnames. Does Oedipus have anything to do with it?

zia Cristiana ("Christian Democracy"), then the party founded by Berlusconi ("Forza Italia") and its allies. But there have also been various figures from the centre-left, and even independent politicians who ran the city, as in the early 1990s, when the artistic director of the Teatro Olimpico was Maurizio Scaparro (mentioned above).[25]

In this perspective we may now consider some examples among the recent productions of *Oedipus Rex,* and its adaptations, at the Teatro Olimpico. In 1585, many spectators attending the *première* criticized it as 'too modern'. And yet, in the eyes of their descendants, it has become a model, an archetype. We might suppose that, in the Teatro Olimpico, Oedipus never left Thebes. He is still lurking backstage. The theatre has undergone several refurbishments, and closures. Each time it re-opened, it was always with a production of *Oedipus* (see Nogara 1972 and Stefani 1992, 1997). Not only the Sophoclean tragedy, but also its modern versions are now part of its glorious past. The frequent re-staging of *Oedipus Tyrannos* (the use of the ancient Greek name is still sometimes used, in contrast to the more common 'Rex'),[26] are testament to the long-term impact of the inaugural performance.

On this regard, our first example is a restaging of *Edipo Tiranno* at the Teatro Olimpico, directed by Gianfranco De Bosio in 1997.[27] Ironically, it was the above cited Maurizio Scaparro, an artistic director appointed by a centre-left mayor, who realized the dream of the Accademia by taking up the 'tyrant Oedipus'. It should be noted, however, that his direction added some personal touches, for instance he asked the innovative choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti to create modern ballets as accompaniments to the choral songs. Most Academicians expected an 'archaeological' or 'philological' production, so they objected to the use of modern dance, which they viewed as 'disturbing'.

Our second example, an *Oedipus Rex* directed by Lamberto Puggelli (2000), was the product of a conservative administration and was superimposed on

25 The current Mayor Giacomo Possamai (elected in May 2023, aged only 33) comes from the left-wing party Partito Democratico. He appointed the 'Assessora alla Cultura' Ilaria Fantin, an artist and musician, to look after Cultural Events.

26 On the term *tyrannos,* and its political implications on stage, see Lanza (1977) and Canfora (2003).

27 Another version of the Sophoclean play, translated and adapted by Manara Valgimigli, with original music by Arrigo Pedrollo, was going to be staged in 1939, but was delayed by the impending war. It was finally directed by Guido Salvini at the Teatro Olimpico in 1948.

the 'perfect' model of a Greek tragedy. However, the director did attempt a few, rather timid touches of modernity, which aroused suspicion in the conservative audience. For example, he added another prologue, with actors dressed in modern clothes, whereas in the rest of the play, the actors wore costumes that embodied the stereotypical view of antiquity.[28] Coloured shadows were projected onto the stage during choral interludes, additionally sharp sounds served to further highlight the time-lapse.

This peculiar soundtrack reminded me previous versions of *Oedipus Rex*, and notably Pier Paolo Pasolini's movie *Oedipus the King* (1967), which Scaparro had previously adapted for the stage at the Teatro Olimpico (1996).[29] The film prologue and epilogue are set in past and present Italy, respectively. In a crucial scene (Laius' aggression towards his son, Oedipus) Pasolini marked the change of time and space between these two worlds with exotic tunes played by flutes and percussions, mainly from Africa. The action moves to foreign locations in North Africa, in a personal, poetic recreation of an 'archaic', primordial, Ancient Greece.

A third example of a peculiar Oedipus at the Teatro Olimpico is the *Oedipus Tyrant* directed by Robert Wilson (which premièred in July 2018 at Pompei, because the archaeological site co-produced the show; it later moved to Vicenza in October 2018 and then went on international tour).[30] The director worked on Oedipus in four theatre workshops over two years (2016–2018). His production, too, was based on Giustiniani's original text (with extracts from another 'vintage' Italian version, dated to 1922, by Ettore Romagnoli).[31] There were dancers and ac-

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28 *Edipo Re*, Teatro Olimpico, 6–10 September 2000 (Teatro degli Incamminati. Directed by Lamberto Puggelli, Italian translation by Dario Del Corno, Music by Filippo Del Corno. Starring Franco Branciaroli, Paola Mannoni, Umberto Ceriani, Antonio Fattorini, Franco Sangermano). See Fumarola-Brazzale (2000).

29 The production *Edipo-Medea* (Teatro Olimpico, 3 September 1996) was based on two scripts by Pasolini, *Oedipus* and *Medea*: see Fusillo (1996) 47–48. All parts were played by Pino Micol and Valeria Moriconi: see Treu (1997b).

30 Regarding the whole production see https://robertwilson.com/oedipus; as for the specific performance in Vicenza see https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/2018/oedipus/; https://www.teatroolimpico.vicenza.it/it/eventi/evento.php/205194, and the video trailer: https://video.repubblica.it/spettacoli-e-cultura/l-oedipus-rex-di-robert-wilson-e-al-teatro-olimpico-di-vicenza-del-palladio/316110/316739 (all links last accessed on 3 January 2026).

31 On Romagnoli, and his contributions to the revival of Greek drama, see Troiani (2022) 121–122 and (2024).

tors, on stage, but they did not interact with each other. They stood, moved, and acted entirely separately on stage (as in De Bosio's version in 1997). These choreographed movements did not include the main two actors – Angela Winkler and Mariano Rigillo – who played all the other parts, while the chorus of seven young actors remained silent. Past and present faced each other, but their voices did not mix in a real dialogue.

THE LATEST SEASONS

As we have argued, in the first part of our paper, the Teatro Olimpico was created to give expression to the memories, aspirations, and political values of an oligarchy. The primary aim of the inaugural performance, and of the theatre itself, was self-celebration. In our opinion, the first production was a founding act and its legacy is still perpetuated today; moreover, since 1585, every director must confront the issues of a unique theatrical space (fragile, and difficult to use), but he/she must also face what we may compare to a 'ghost' that lives in this theatre, an embalmed Oedipus who has become a permanent fixture. So far, Vicenza 'suffers' its heritage, trying to maintain a delicate balance between reverential fear and a cultish devotion to the Classics (which has often prevailed in the Accademia Olimpica, an organisation sensitive to the weight of tradition and often hostile to innovation). The Academicians are still in charge of events, conferences, and cultural activities. The most conservative section of the audience, however, may remain a prisoner of the theatre, condemned to watch the same spectacle, forever, as if time had stopped. Elsewhere, other classical festivals have chosen the opposite path: to interpret ancient texts with a modern sensibility.

Like Oedipus, the Teatro Olimpico symbolically stands at a crossroads. It can either move towards the future, with new adaptations, and innovations, or it can become a museum of antiquity dedicated to their version of *Oedipus,* repeated ever since its foundation. Such is the destiny that Prague reserved for Mozart's *Don Juan*: 'condemned' to an infinite number of replicas in the same theatre that hosted its *première* in 1787. What will happen to our hero, the Vicenza Oedipus, now four centuries old? Should he remain forever locked inside the Teatro Olimpico? Or will he finally get out?

In our opinion, a quite significant answer to these questions comes from the latest artistic directors of the Classical Festival ("Spettacoli Classici") at the Teatro Olimpico. Ermanna Montanari and Marco Martinelli were appointed in Feb-

ruary 2024 for two years (2024 and 2025). They created two innovative, inclusive festival programmes, in the Teatro Olimpico as well as in other sites and theatres across Vicenza.[32] They marked a turning point in the history of the theatre and of the entire town, with their coherent concept and aims. They involved a great number of citizens as participants and spectators. Every event was fully booked soon after it went on sale. Significantly, the directors entitled both seasons "Coro" (Chorus), as shown in the poster designed by the Italian artist Igort (see Fig. 1).

The chorus has always been the focus of their theatrical practice, as demonstrated in their fifty-year-long career, in particular by the collaborative projects which involved them directly and therefore bore their personal signatures (see Treu 2024a). In 2024, their first *piece* in Vicenza was "Purgatorio dei Poeti" (see Fig. 2), a free adaptation of Dante's *Commedia,* directed by Martinelli and Montanari, which had already inspired their earlier projects (such as "Cantiere Dante" and Martinelli's movie *The sky over Kibera*).[33] Fifty non-professionals participants from Vicenza and the surrounding area, selected via a public call ("Chiamata pubblica") took part in a theatre workshop, under the supervision of the artistic directors and their crew, and then performed on stage at Teatro Astra on 14th October 2024. Another communal event based on a public call was "Festa Silenzio (Azione di improvvisazione creativa per una comunità di performer" ("Silence Feast: an impromptu action for a community of performers", see Figg. 3–5).[34]

Moreover, in 2024 and 2025, Martinelli created for the Teatro Olimpico two site-specific adaptations of Aristophanes' *Plutus* and *Lysistrata: Pluto – God of Gold* (2024, see Figg. 6–8) and *Lisistrata* (2025, see Figg. 9–11).

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32 See respectively https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/ and https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/78-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/ (last accessed 3 January 2026).

33 The project "Cantiere Dante" (2017–2022) involved over 1000 citizens and won many awards: see https://www.teatrodellealbe.com/ita/contenuto.php?id=113 and https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/purgatorio-dei-poeti/ (last accessed 2 January 2026).

34 The workshop, open to any kind of performers and musicians, coordinated by the composer Francesco Giomi, aimed at a final performance in Palladio's Basilica: see https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/festa-silenzio/ (last accessed 2 January 2026).

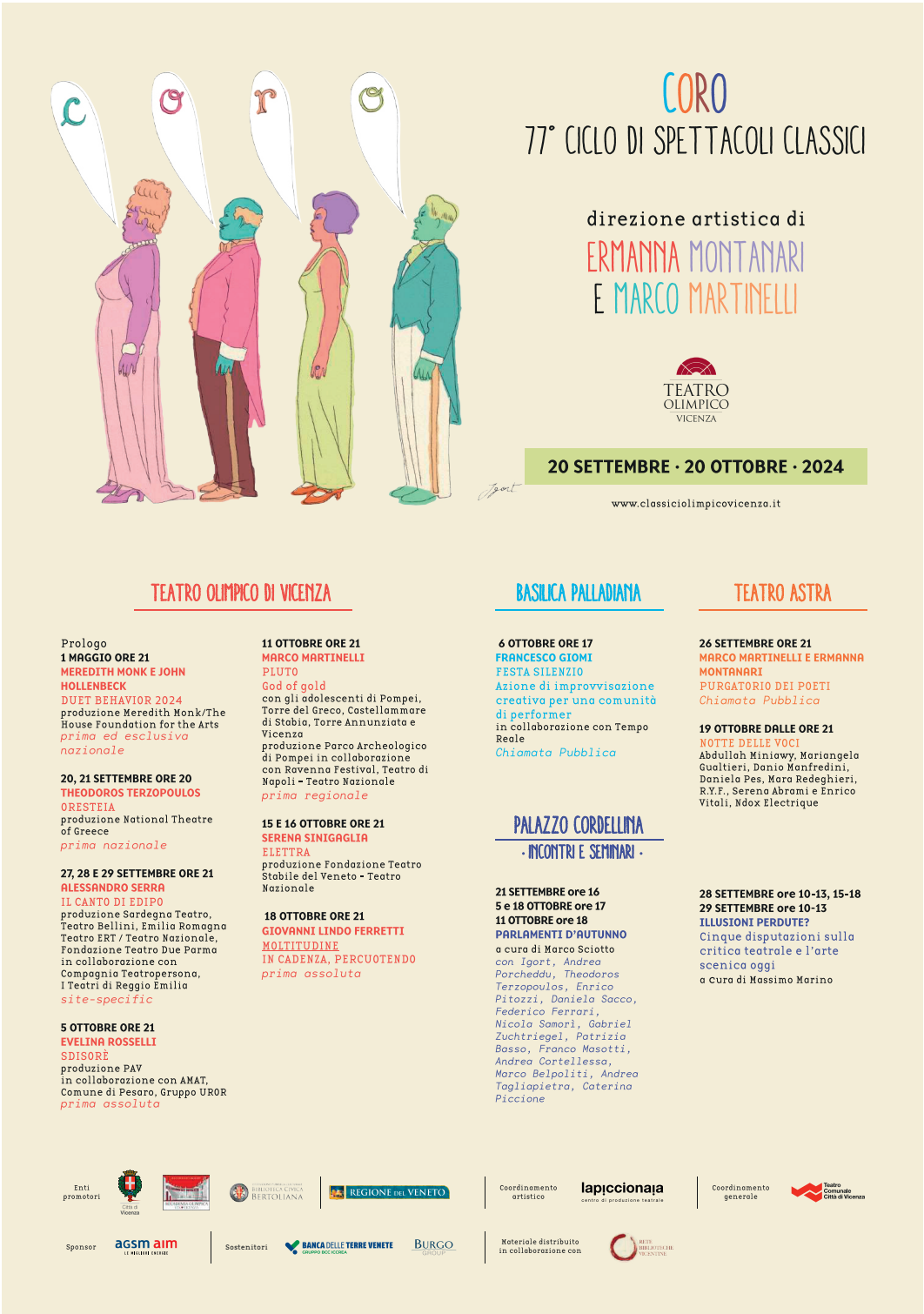
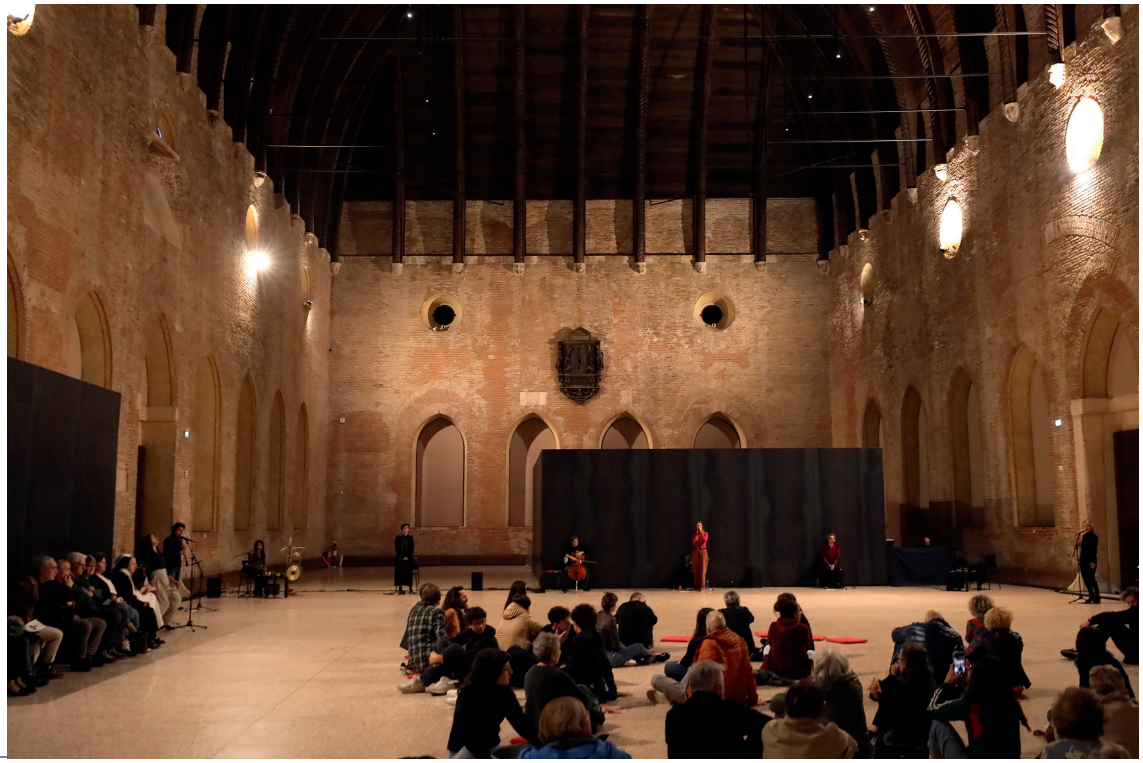
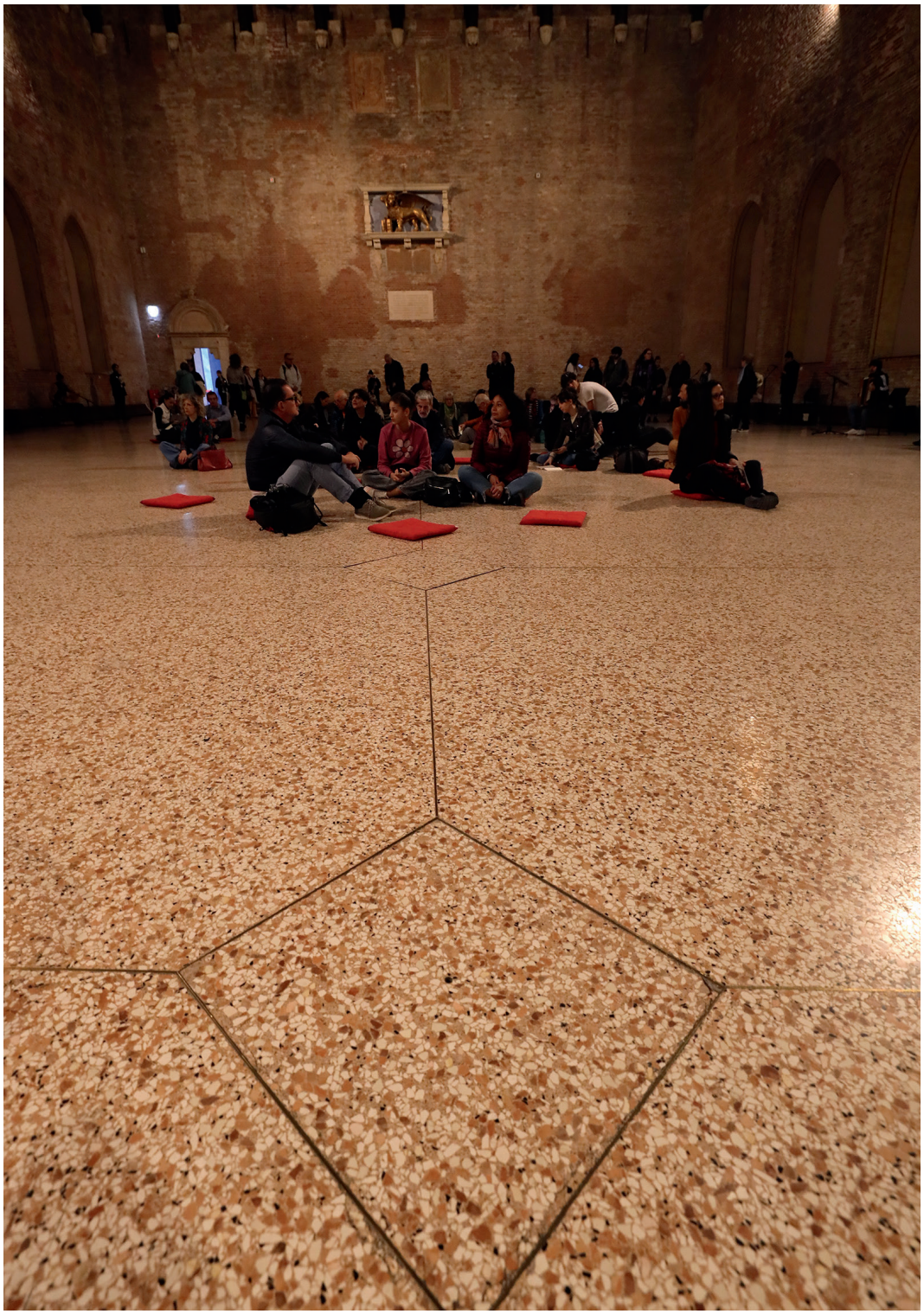


Figure 1 Season poster by Igort, *Coro* ("Chorus"), 2024

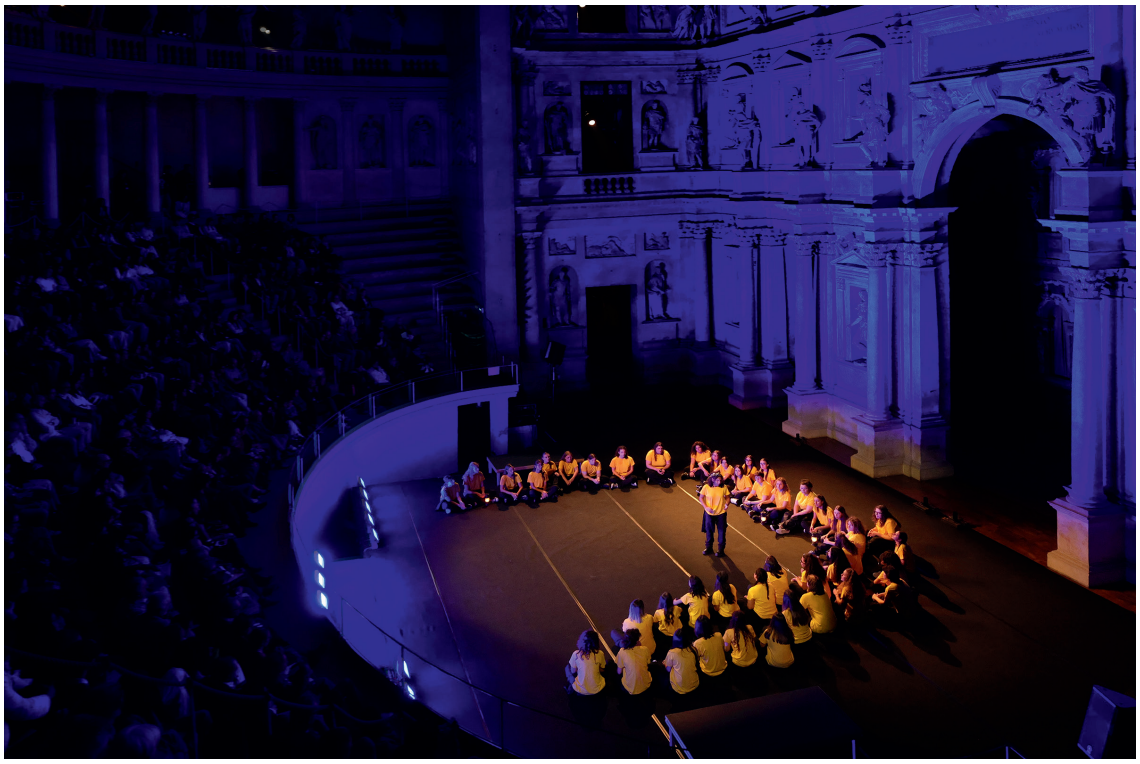
Figure 2 *Purgatorio dei Poeti*





Figures 3–5 *Festa Silenzio*

Figures 6–8 *Pluto – God of Gold*



Figures 9–11 *Lisistrata*

They were part of a four-year collective project (called "Sogno di Volare"), co-produced with Ravenna Festival and Pompeii Archaeological Park, and previously staged in Pompeii and Ravenna.[35] Each production may be considered a sociological and pedagogical experiment, which combines different languages and cultures: the dialects of southern and northern Italy mix on stage, despite their aural differences, blended into a harmonious soundscape. Moreover, in order to fit each specific site and its audience, the original text by Aristophanes is continuously adapted and changed by Martinelli and his collaborators (Laura Redaelli, Valeria Pollice, Gianni Vastarella). In each site, including Vicenza, a local crew of children and young adults is selected via an open call, and trained in order to interact with the original chorus of young students from Pompeii and the surrounding areas. In Vicenza, Martinelli and his collaborators instructed the chorus to address the audience with local jokes and allusions to their town, and to the historical site of the performance (as the Aristophanic chorus did in ancient Athens). So, the Teatro Olimpico itself, with its peculiar spaces and features imbued the new versions of *Plutus* and *Lysistrata,* very different from those staged at Pompeii, in the open-air Teatro Grande ("Great Theatre") and in the Teatro Alighieri (Ravenna).[36]

The site-specific performances at the Teatro Olimpico were conceived in constant dialogue with the theatre, the statues and the wooden sets. In *Plutus* (a play about the unequal distribution of wealth), the voices of children and young adults from southern Italy, for the very first time, were heard in the historical heart of the northern region called Veneto. The present and past sponsors of the Teatro Olimpico were ideally watching the show. In *Lysistrata,* the façade and the wooden set are transformed into Athen's Acropolis 'occupied' by women with banners which strongly resembled those held – in the same days –

35 See Saturnino (2024) Di Martino (2024), Di Martino & Bartoletti & Refini (2024). De Marinis (2024), Treu (2024c, 299), https://www.tcvi.it/en/classici and teatrodellealbe.org, about the whole project and Martinelli's adaptations, respectively based on Aristophanes' *Birds, Acharnians, Plutus, Lysistrata. Lysistrata* was also staged at Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato (Milan) on 15 and 16 November 2025: see https://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2025-2026/lisistrata (all websites accessed on 12 January 2026).

36 For a brief history of Teatro Alighieri (in the nineteenth century) see https://www.teatroalighieri.org/teatro/storia/ (last accessed 12 January 2026).

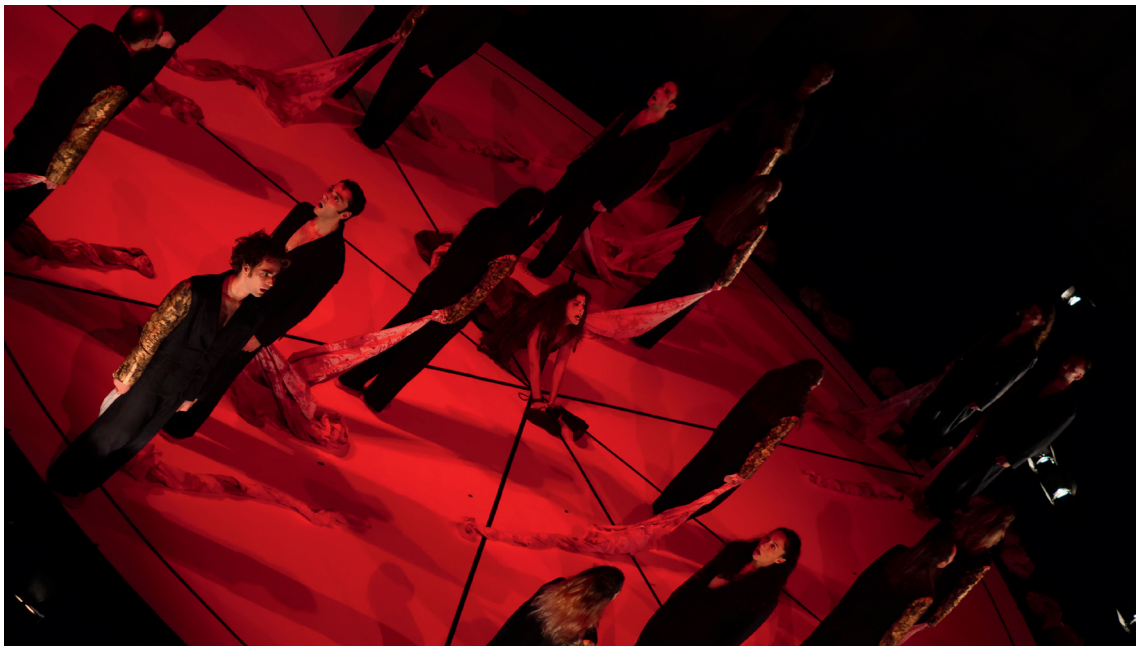
by thousands of demonstrators who 'occupied' Italy in massive strikes against Gaza war[37] (see figure 21).

In the context of Vicenza and specifically of the Teatro Olimpico, each adaptation aims at bringing Aristophanes "back to life" (in Martinelli's words), at putting him not only on stage ("mise en scène"), but "into life" ("messa in vita"). Both productions were transformed several times, by changing performers, sites and audiences. In the Teatro Olimpico, all too often viewed as a monument to the city's prosperity, and a 'museum of antiquity', Martinelli's adaptations become "an explosive mix", to be handled with care. The project is not yet concluded and still deserves further research: a survey on spectators, for instance, should take into consideration their feedback after the performance, and their understanding of the languages and dialects used in each site-specific production.

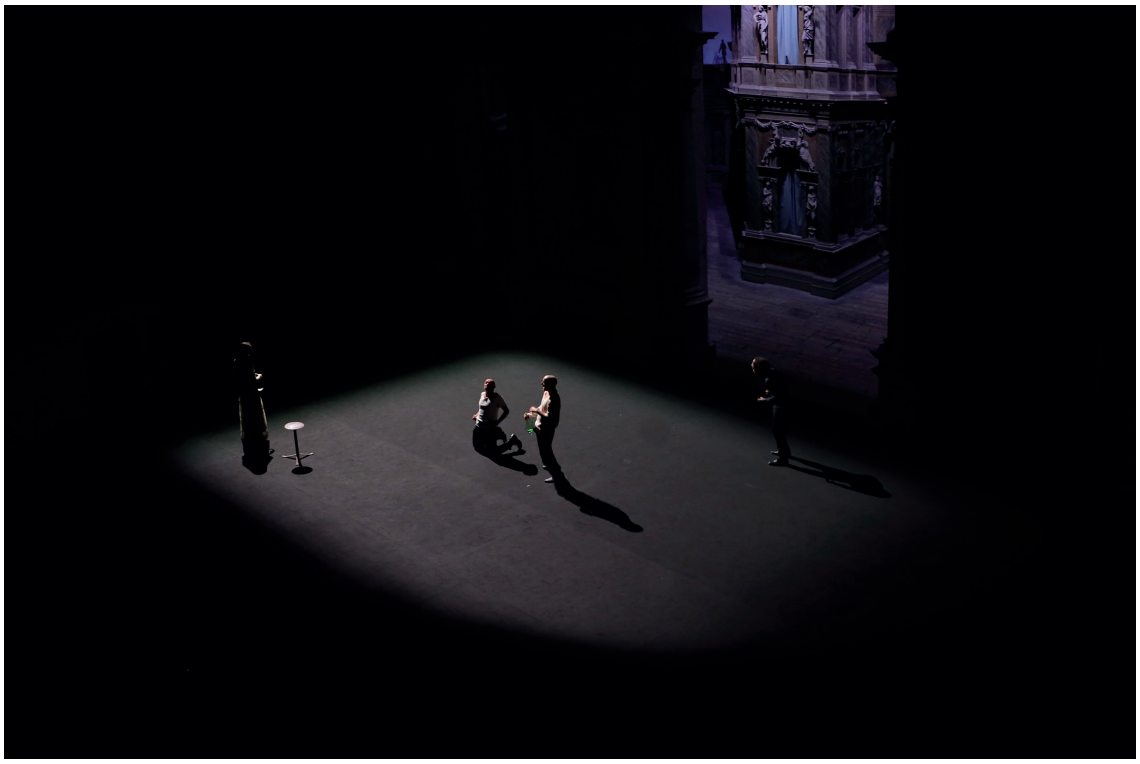
Another interesting case-study, where a sort of "symbiosis" between the historical site and the living bodies took place, was provided by another production which travelled from its original location (the Greek theatre of Epidaurus, where its summer *première* took place) to Vicenza. The Greek director Theodoros Terzopoulos, invited by Montanari and Martinelli, staged here his personal version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia.* Thirty years after the last production he directed in the Teatro Olimpico (*Antigone,* 1994), he created a site-specific, communal performance in modern Greek, focused on the chorus of twenty performers, moving together as a single body. They dominated the stage, interacted with the actors, and with the theatrical space. The living energy of their bodies contrasted sharply with the sixteenth-century theatre, particularly the portraits of the former members of the Accademia Olimpica. This contrast, and the violence evoked by the whole show, had an effective power and caused strong emotions in the audience. Fear, for instance, was a Leitmotiv since the prologue of the *Agamemnon,* reinforced by the chorus and Clytemnestra, and later by Cassandra with her prophecy and death. The climax was reached in the third drama, the *Eumenides*: in Terzopoulos' production, the chorus members surrounded and attacked Orestes during his trial; Athena not only menaced the Erinyes, but used her weapons against them, forcing them to surrender by violent means. In the final scene, sounds of shooting and bombs falling were heard, while a voiceover

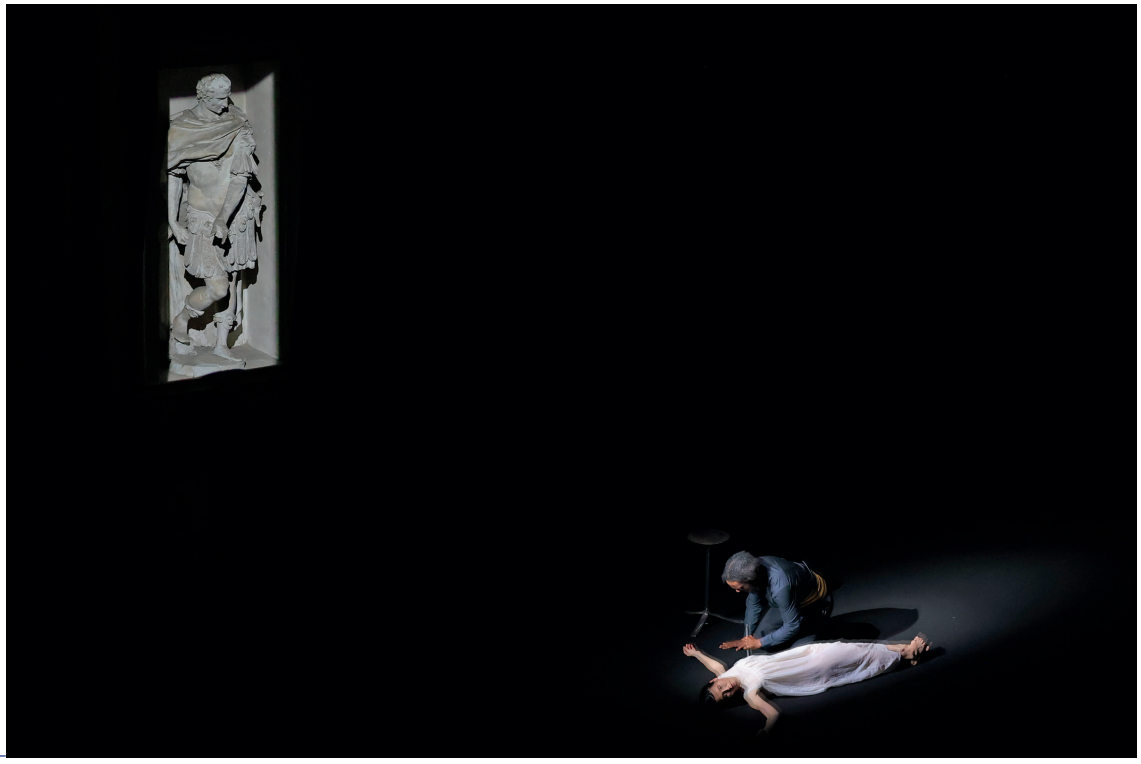
37 See https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8rdd5dzvro and https://www.labornotes.org/2025/10/millions-italians-join-general-strike-gaza (all sites accessed on 9 January 2026).

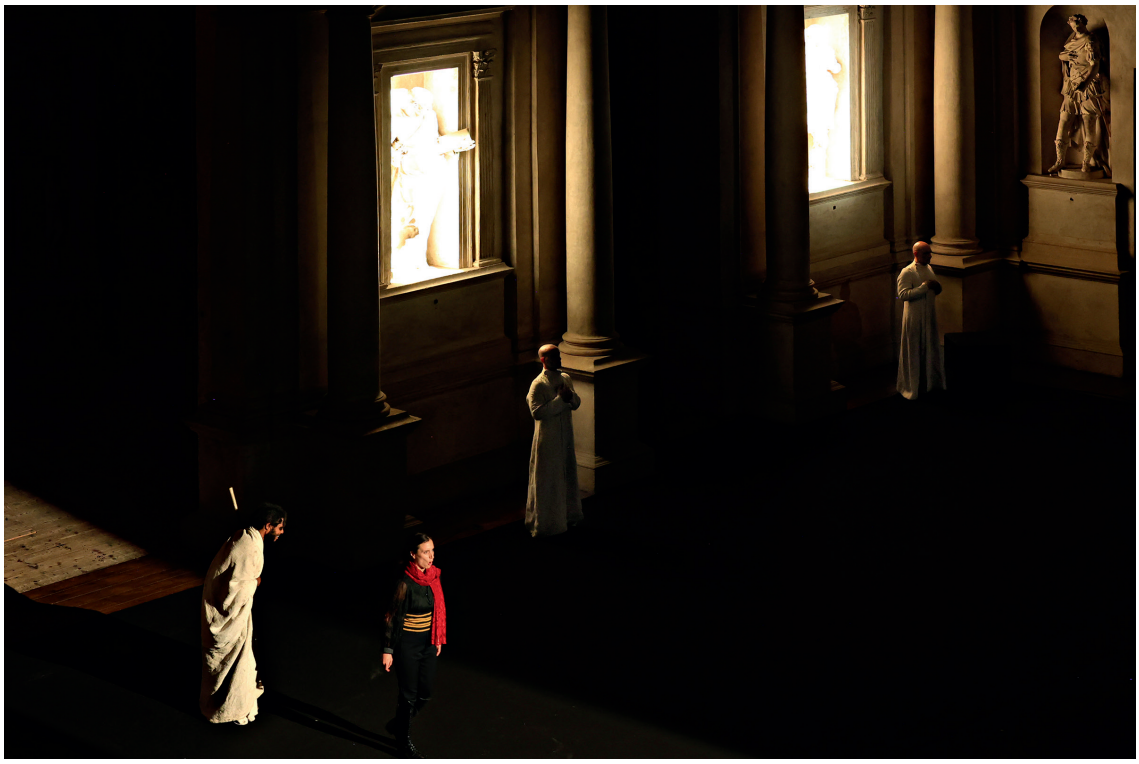
Oedipus and the Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza) at a crossroads



Figures 12 and 13 *Oresteia*







Figures 14–16 *Il canto di Edipo*

listed the increasing number of victims of current wars, leaving the spectators paralysed, like the statues that surrounded them (see Fig. 12–13).[38]

In the same season (2024) a third, site-specific production should be briefly mentioned, as an 'eternal return' to Oedipus, first owner of the Teatro Olimpico: *Il canto di Edipo* ("Oedipus's Song") by Alessandro Serra (Fig. 14–16).

This was a free adaptation based on Sophocles' Theban tragedies and other important texts in the history of the Teatro Olimpico. This production, too, was specifically designed for this theatre. The actors were trained to interact closely with its distinctive space. The text was translated into an archaic dialect called "grecanico", a 'greekish' language once spoken in small pockets in Southern Italy and Sicily that were formerly part of Magna Graecia (Italian spectators could not understand it without subtitles). By using this dialect and composing lyric 'songs' about Oedipus, Serra wanted to activate feelings and memories in the modern audience comparable to – in his words – those which were originally connected with the name of 'Oedipus' in Ancient Greece.[39]

Montanari and Martinelli also invited other artists, performers, singers and musicians to join them: Meredith Monk and John Hollenbeck were special guests for a unique performance of "Duet Behavior 2024" (on May 1), as an *Avant première* of their first Festival. Evelina Rosselli performed *SdisOrè* (modern version of *Oresteia* by the late Italian poet Giovanni Testori) using masks and puppets (Fig. 17–18).[40]

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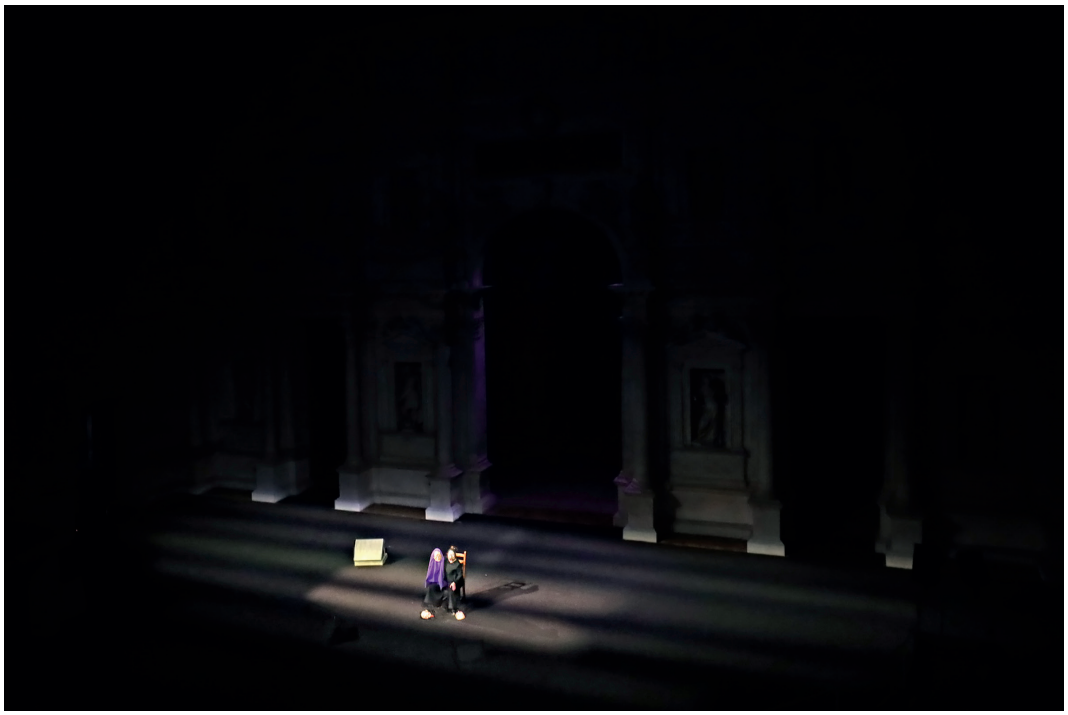
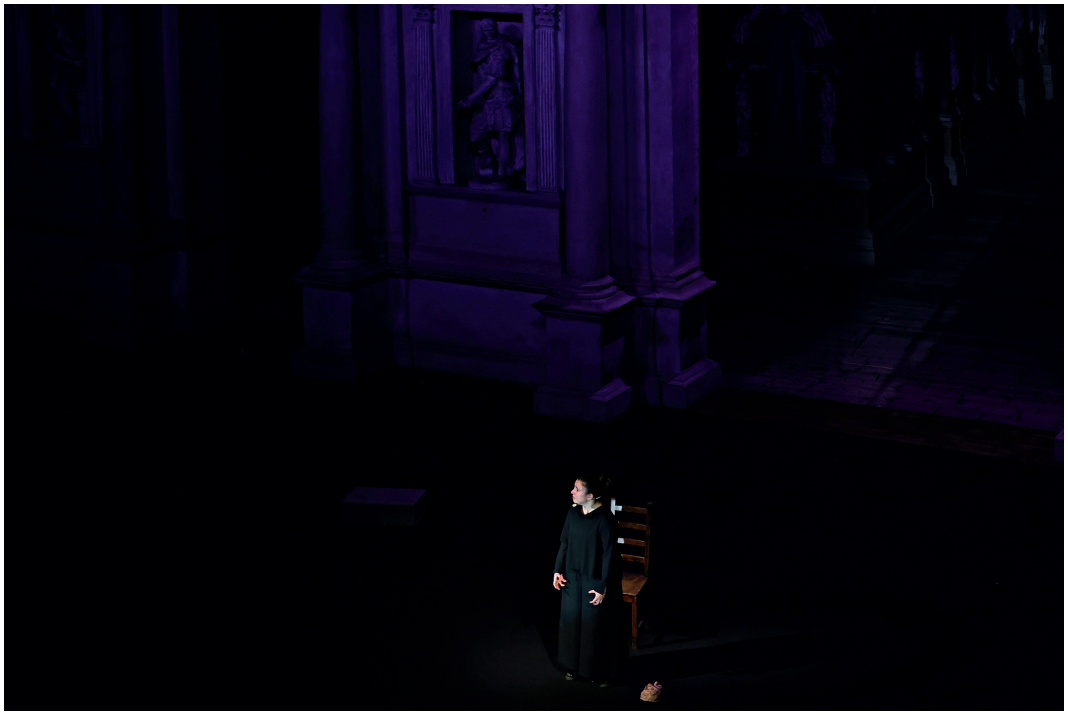
38 See Barone (2024), Tentorio (2024), Treu (2024b) and Ugolini (2024).

39 See Serra's foreword on the festival website: https://www.tcvi.it/en/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/il-canto-di-edipo/. Also, in Martinelli's *Lysistrata* (see above) few songs composed by Vincenzo Sparagna (author of the original score) were sung by the female chorus in the same dialect ("grecanico"): https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/78-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-78-ciclo-classici/lisistrata/ (all sites accessed 10 January 2026).

40 The title *SdisOrè* poetically evokes an "anti-Orestes". The text is a free adaptation of ancient sources about Orestes – from the *Oresteia* to Euripides' tragedies *Elektra* and *Orestes* – written by the Italian playwright Giovanni Testori (see Treu 2024d and giovannitestori.it, last accessed 10 January 2026). His poetic language is partly based on his dialect (from the Northern area of Milan) partly on brand new terms that he invented with creative sensibility. He wrote several dramas inspired by historical or mythical figures, whose stories were transformed into an imaginary, itinerant show of a wandering actor (named "Scarrozzante"). Evelina Rosselli played all the roles by changing her voice and transforming herself with masks and puppets. See https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/sdisore/ (last accessed 8 January 2026).





Figures 17 and 18 *SdisOrè*

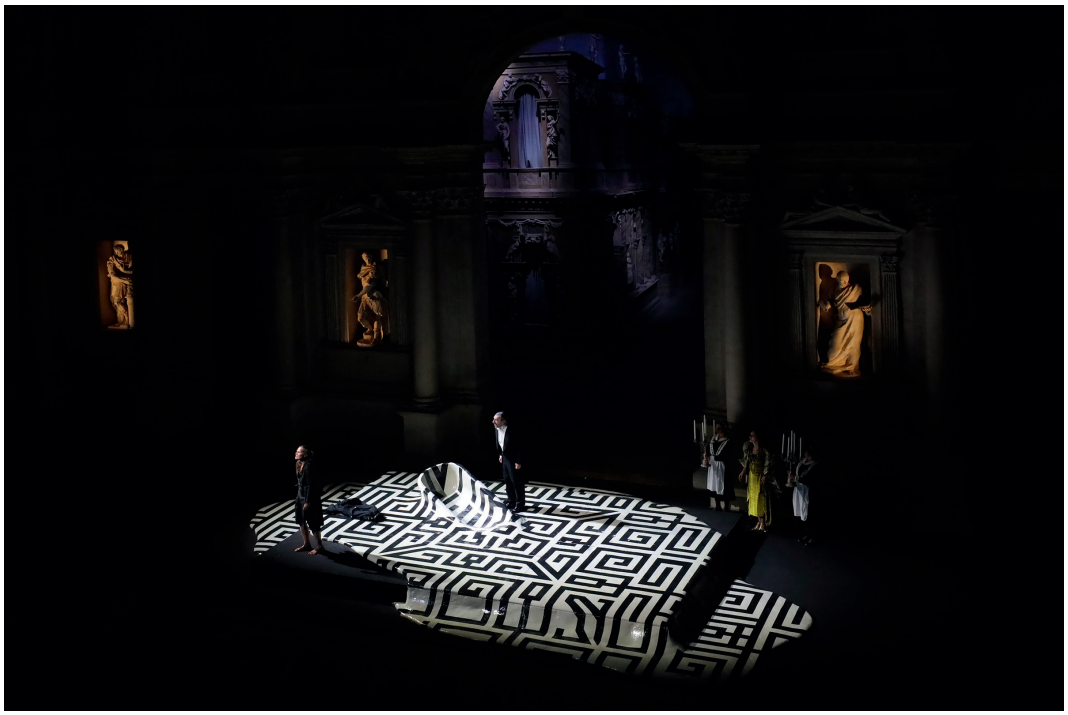
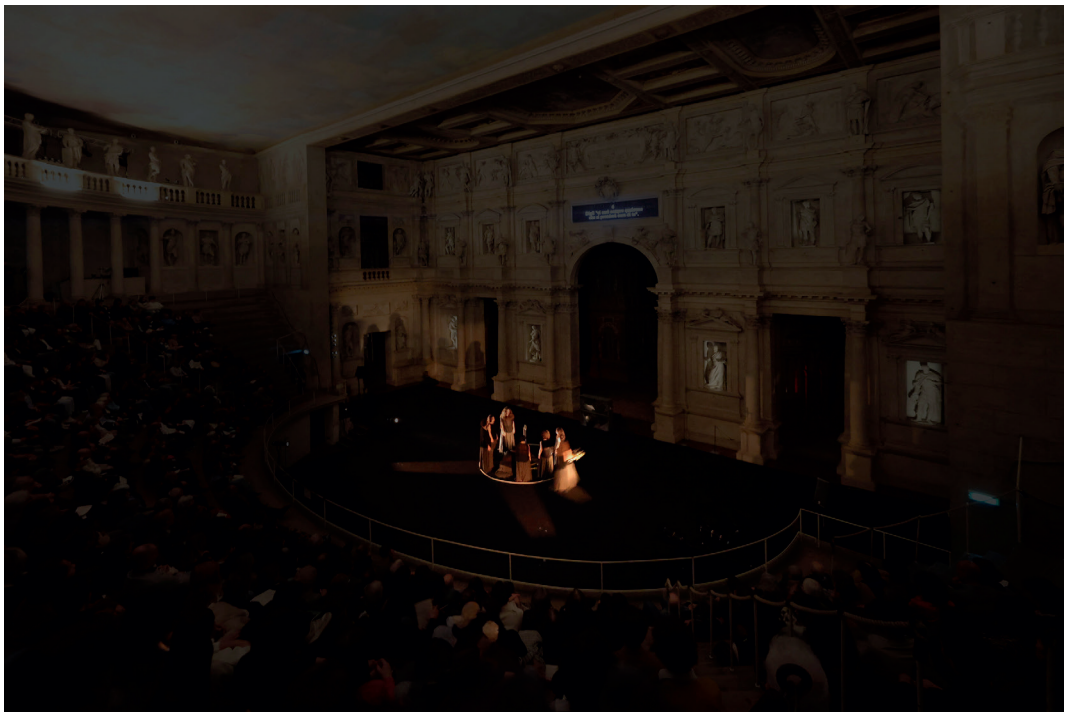


Figure 19 *Elettra*

Figure 20 *Moltitudine*

Figures 21–23 *Notte delle voci*



Figures 24 and 25 *Baccanti*

Serena Sinigaglia directed a minimal, but effective adaptation of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, with two talented actresses (Arianna Scommegna and Federica Rosellini; Fig. 19).

The singer and musician Giovanni Lindo Ferretti performed his creation *Moltitudine* ("Multitude"; Fig. 20).

Ermanna Montanari directed a collective ceremony called "Notte delle Voci" ("Night of Voices"; Figg. 21–23) which involved international guests (artists, poets, writers, singers, musicians and painters), performing poems, music and live painting (by Stefano Ricci).[41]

In 2025, the trend was confirmed by the national premieres of two site-specific performances, freely inspired by ancient myths: first, the opera *Il novello Perseo* (*The new Perseus*) by Salvatore Sciarrino, a brand-new version of the previous opera *Perseo e Andromeda*, by the same composer, which mixed electronic music with sounds played live by an orchestra. Secondly, an original version of Euripides's *Bacchae* by Anagoor, a well-known Italian company (based in a town near Vicenza, founded in 2000 as a "a collective laboratory between theatre, performing art, philosophy and hypermedia scene").[42] The ancient tragedy was freely adapted and played by young pupils attending the drama school of Teatro Verdi (Padua). The actors and the chorus occupied the whole space of the Teatro Olimpico, from the scene to the audience seats, while Pentheus challenged Dionysus. This production too, like those cited by Terzopoulos and Serra, radically changed the ancient text, in order to involve the whole audience in a mysterious, fascinating, collective rite (Figg. 24–25).

In conclusion, both seasons created by Montanari and Martinelli in Vicenza (2024–2025) were based on their personal view of a 'community theatre': they transformed the entire city – not only the Teatro Olimpico – and they involved a large number of citizens in their productions. In our opinion, such an innovative approach marked a turning point in the history of Vicenza. Over the centuries, the Teatro Olimpico has become a living monument for posterity. And yet, some directors aimed at bringing it back to its main function as a theatre and a venue for a community. The municipality of Vicenza has just chosen a new artistic director for the next season: the Teatro Olimpico, like Oedipus, is at a crossroads.

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41 For the concept of this special event see the festival website: https://www.tcvi.it/it/classici/spettacoli/77-ciclo-di-spettacoli-classici/spettacoli-77-ciclo-classici/notte-delle-voci-1/ (last accessed 8 January 2026).

42 See anagoor.com (last accessed 12 January 2026) and Manzella (2025).

We invite critics, spectators, scholars and practitioners to keep paying attention to this peculiar case-study in the history of modern theatre.

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FIGURES

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Fi n. 1
Poster by Igort: "Coro", 77th Classical Festival – Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza), 2024.

Fi n. 2
Purgatorio dei Poeti – Martinelli/Montanari
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Fi n. 3–5
Festa Silenzio – Giomi
Ph.by Roberto De Biasio

Fi n. 6–8
Pluto. God of Gold – Martinelli
Ph by Roberto De Biasio

Fi n. 9–11
Lisistrata – Martinelli
Ph by Roberto De Biasio

Fi n. 12–14
Oresteia – Terzopoulos
Ph by Daniel Bertacche

Fi n. 15 and 16
Il canto di Edipo – Serra
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Fi n. 19
Elettra – Sinigaglia
Ph by Roberto De Biasio

Fi n. 20
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Fi n. 24 and 25
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Ph by Roberto De Biasio

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Medea fra mito e cronaca: la tragedia popolare di Francesco Mastriani

Abstract Thanks to the complex temper and personality of its main character, the *Medea* of Euripides has generated an impressive amount of rewritings. This article aims to analyze the *Fortleben* of Medea-myth focusing on Francesco Mastriani's *La Medea di Porta Medina.* The Italian author transfers the euripidean drama to a popular context, re-interpretating Medea as Coletta Esposito, a woman of the people who, betrayed and marginalized, acts with determination and clarity. The comparison between Euripides' drama and Mastriani's novel shows continuity and differences in the representation of inner laceration and moral responsibility, highlighting how ancient myth can be reborn in modern and realistic prose and maintaining the tension between emotion and rationality. This new representation of Medea offers new keys to understanding the euripidean character as a figure of otherness and resistance.

Keywords Medea, Francesco Mastriani, Euripides, Classical Reception, Greek Theatre

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INTRODUZIONE*

Nel repertorio delle tragedie greche pervenute, la *Medea* di Euripide è fra quelle che più hanno catturato l'interesse di studiosi, autori e artisti di ogni epoca e cultura[1]. Nonostante la sua storia letteraria relativamente recente rispetto ad altri miti tragici[2], infatti, il racconto proposto da Euripide ha affascinato un elevato numero di autori, che nelle proprie opere hanno descritto una donna dal carattere forte – talora anche accentuandone il *furor* vendicativo, come nella tragedia di Seneca (cf. *infra* p. 14) – approfondendo di volta in volta uno o più aspetti presenti nel modello greco. Così, ne è derivata una molteplicità di riscritture che hanno isolato e valorizzato singoli aspetti del mito: la donna gelosa, la vittima, la straniera, la strega. Raramente tali riscritture restituiscono la complessità della Medea euripidea, in cui convergono elementi profondamente diversi gli uni dagli altri: nella tragedia, infatti, l'eroina è allo stesso tempo una figlia, una sorella, una madre, una moglie ferita e una donna orgogliosa. È forse proprio questa stratificazione a costituire uno dei nuclei più fecondi della fortuna della tragedia di Euripide.

Muovendo da tali considerazioni, il presente contributo intende proporre una lettura di una riscrittura ottocentesca meno nota, *La Medea di Porta Medina* di Francesco Mastriani, dopo aver brevemente illustrato, senza pretese di completezza, la fortuna di Medea nella letteratura italiana contemporanea, con un *focus* sulle opere ritenute più significative.

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1 Per un esame della fortuna del mito di Medea, cfr. in part. Mimoso-Ruiz (1980) e (1992) 769–779; Ieranò (2000) 178; Rubino & Degregori (2000).

2 La tragedia, infatti, è stata rappresentata nel 431 a.C. (cfr. arg. I Eur. Med.) e, al di là di qualche riferimento sparso nella letteratura precedente a Euripide (Od. 10,135–137, 11,256–257, XII 66–72, Eumel. frr. 1–10 Bern., Naup. frr. 1–12 Bern., Hes. theog. 956-992-1002, Pind. P. 4,213–219.), le fonti del mito sono poche: soprattutto, in nessuna di esse Medea sembra avere un ruolo così rilevante.

IL *FORTLEBEN* DI MEDEA

Uno dei nodi interpretativi più fecondo è relativo al figlicidio che Medea commette: se l'eroina l'abbia commesso per mera gelosia o, più probabilmente, perché Giasone ha infranto i sacri giuramenti della ξενία infangando la sua τιμή (cfr. in part. vv. 160–163, 207–209), è infatti una questione essenziale. E l'ambiguità di un gesto tanto estremo ha fatto sì che il dramma, nonostante il suo iniziale insuccesso alle Grandi Dionisie del 431 a.C.[3], potesse ispirare numerose riscritture. Infatti, i numerosi autori che nel corso del tempo si sono ispirati all'opera euripidea hanno di volta in volta offerto una motivazione diversa del figlicidio[4], proponendo un'interpretazione e una caratterizzazione dell'eroina sempre diverse: dalla megera crudele e assetata di sangue della tragedia senecana (cfr. in part. vv. 40–43 e 51–55) alla Medea più ‹umana› e ‹vittima› di autori più moderni e recenti.

Se, infatti, si esaminano alcune fra le opere moderne più significative[5], un aspetto che tutte condividono è la tendenza a giustificare in qualche modo, o comunque a capire nel profondo, le ragioni della protagonista, spostando il *focus* sul dramma interiore che ella vive a causa dell'estraneità rispetto al mondo greco che la circonda. Come ha mostrato la critica più recente[6], tale tendenza si declina secondo alcuni filoni ricorrenti nella ricezione moderna del mito: da un lato la lettura storico-politica e ideologica, che interpreta Medea come figura dell'alterità perseguitata e del capro espiatorio[7], dall'altro la trasposizione

3 Sull'esito dell'agone del 431 a.C., cfr. arg. I Eur. Med. Dalla stessa fonte si conoscono anche i titoli delle altre tragedie, *Ditti* (frr. 330b–348 K.) e *Filottete* (frr. 787–801 K.), e del dramma satiresco *I mietitori,* che non si è conservato (cfr. Kannicht 2004, 425).

4 Talvolta, come nel caso di Christa Wolf (cfr. *infra* n. 7), Medea viene addirittura assolta e a uccidere i bambini sono i Corinzi, come, tra l'altro, sembra accadere nella versione originale del mito (cfr. Eumel. frr. 1–10 Bern., *Naup.* frr. 1–12 Bern., Paus. 2,3,11).

5 Fra le altre, vale la pena di ricordare la tragedia *La lunga notte di Medea* di Corrado Alvaro, del 1949; il film *Medea* di Pier Paolo Pasolini, del 1969; il romanzo *Medea. Stimmen* di Christa Wolf (1996, ed. it. 1999). Per un elenco più dettagliato delle opere che si sono ispirate alla tragedia di Euripide, cfr. più di recente Pucci (2017) 89–267; Martina (2018) I 335–346.

6 Cfr. in part. Ieranò (2000) 178: «C'è una ricca messe di Medee novecentesche sovente arruolate al servizio di un programma "ideologico-politico"». Cfr. anche Fusillo (2010).

7 In questo senso, il romanzo di Christa Wolf (1999) è di notevole interesse: l'autrice va infatti ben oltre il semplice binomio oppositivo grecità-barbarie, presente *in nuce* già nel modello euripideo, rifacendosi a tutta la documentazione disponibile, anche a quella precedente la tra-

cinematografica e performativa, che insiste sul contrasto fra mondo mitico e razionalità moderna[8]. Limitando il campo d'indagine alla produzione italiana del Novecento, particolarmente significative sono la tragedia *La lunga notte di Medea* di Corrado Alvaro (1949) e il film *Medea* di Pier Paolo Pasolini (1969).

Per quanto riguarda l'opera di Alvaro, particolarmente rilevante è la lettura del mito che l'autore offre scrivendo della sua tragedia e dell'attrice e regista Tatiana Pavlova (*La lunga notte di Medea,* ed. Milano 1966, 166): «Medea mi è apparsa un'antenata di tante donne che hanno subìto una persecuzione razziale, e di tante che, respinte dalla loro patria, vagano senza passaporto da nazione a nazione, popolano i campi di concentramento e i campi di profughi. Secondo me ella uccide i figli per non esporli alla tragedia del vagabondaggio, della persecuzione, della fame: estingue il seme di una maledizione sociale e di razza, li uccide in qualche modo per salvarli, in uno slancio disperato di amore materno». L'autore, così, assolve Medea, motivando il suo atto non con la furia vendicativa, legata alla gelosia e al *furor* amoroso, ma con il razzismo dei Corinzi, a cui per tanto tempo aveva vanamente tentato di conformarsi[9]. Chiaramente, dietro

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gedia di Euripide (cfr. Eumel. frr. 1–10 Bern., *Naup.* frr. 1–12 Bern.), e descrivendo una Medea insolita, travagliata dall'amore ma soprattutto dal ‹razzismo› di cui è vittima, e depositaria di un sapere ancestrale e onnicomprensivo. Lo scopo che la scrittrice si è proposta è stato quello di attribuire a Medea non il ruolo di maga assassina, ma quello di capro espiatorio, che sempre le donne sembrano aver avuto nella storia della cultura e della letteratura occidentali (cfr. in part. Chiarloni 1999, 238). Sul romanzo di Christa Wolf, cfr. in part. Rubino (2000) 87–88, 105–118.

8 Un'analisi dettagliata delle trasposizioni cinematografiche attualizzanti della *Medea* è offerta da Danese (2008) 53–54 e Fusillo (2010). Alcuni fra i titoli che meritano attenzione, oltre al film di Pasolini del 1969, sono *A Dream of Passion* (Jules Dassin, USA 1978), *Der Schlaf der Vernunft* (Ula Stöckl, Germania 1984), *Asì es la vida* (Arturo Ripstein, Messico 2001) – a cui Danese (2008, 61–65) dedica un'approfondita analisi – e, più di recente, la miniserie TV *Medea* (Theo van Gogh, Olanda 2005, postuma).

9 È importante notare come l'autore metta in rilievo sin da subito la volontà di Medea di grecizzarsi. Nel primo tempo, in particolare, le due schiave Layalé e Perseide spiegano alla loro padrona che diverrà una vera greca perché le donne greche *stanno a casa. Gli uomini vanno dalle loro amanti. La gioia è delle amanti. I guai e i dolori sono delle mogli* (Alvaro 1966, 13). Ma, d'altronde, lo stesso tentativo e desiderio era già espresso dalla protagonista nel primo monologo della tragedia euripidea, al v. 222 χρὴ δὲ ξένον μὲν κάρτα προσχωρεῖν πόλει, "è necessario che uno straniero si uniformi bene alla città". Mastronarde (2002, 207) nota in questo verso l'uso del verbo προσχωρεῖν, ‹prendere la parte di qualcuno› in una disputa, ‹conformarsi›, ‹seguire› un'opinione comune. Le traduzioni dei testi antichi sono mie.

a questa caratterizzazione del personaggio c'è la recentissima esperienza della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, della persecuzione e dello sterminio degli Ebrei, dei Sinti, dei Rom e di altre minoranze[10].

Anche il film di Pasolini si colloca nel solco della tradizione che valorizza l'aspetto dell'alterità di Medea[11]. Nella pellicola il regista enfatizza la diversità della protagonista servendosi anche dei costumi scenici e di sonorità etniche e ancestrali che accompagnano i momenti di ‹irrazionalismo› che caratterizzano il mondo atavico e mitico di cui Medea è emblema, in opposizione al razionalismo moderno di cui è portavoce Giasone[12]: evidente è qui il contrasto fra il mondo barbarico della Colchide, dove si compiono sacrifici umani come rito di fertilità, e il mondo greco di Corinto, ambientato in uno dei capolavori del razionalismo rinascimentale, il Campo dei Miracoli di Pisa. Questa rappresentazione è, d'altronde, perfettamente coerente con tutta la produzione pasoliniana, caratterizzata da una forte dicotomia fra un mondo mitico e atavico – identificato, ad esempio, nelle prime poesie in dialetto friulano e nel rapporto col mito greco – e un mondo ormai fuori da quell'aura sacra e primigenia, ‹contaminato› dal neo-

10 Per un approfondimento su questo tema, cfr. in part. Fornaro (1997) 118. È questo, ad esempio, il caso dell'opera di José Bergamín (1895–1983), *Medea la Encantadora* del 1956 (cfr. in part. Citti & Neri 2001, 103–106, 108–109). Qui Giasone assume le vesti del *conquistador* spagnolo crudele e insensibile, mentre Medea è l'indigena sottomessa. Per un'analisi più approfondita nella tragedia, cfr. in part. Neri (2002). Come ha osservato Fusillo (2010), il filone ‹colonialista› torna in un più recente film, *Médée miracle* di Tonino De Bernardi (2008).

11 La letteratura critica disponibile sulla *Medea* pasoliniana e sul suo rapporto con il modello greco di Euripide è estremamente ricca: cfr. in part. Fusillo (1996 e 2010); Fabbro (2004); Carlà-Uhink (2008) 89–115; Danese (2008) 45–48. Per la particolare affinità che lo lega alla pellicola di Pasolini, vale la pena di ricordare *Medea*, film per la TV realizzato da Lars von Trier nel 1988 a partire da una sceneggiatura di Dreyer, il quale aveva anche pensato a Maria Callas per il ruolo di Medea. Cfr. in part. Rubino (2000) 14–51; Fusillo (2010).

12 Sull'uso e sul significato della musica nella produzione cinematografica di Pasolini (e specificamente sul film *Medea*), cfr. in part. Calabretto (2004) 135–165. Un ruolo simile è ricoperto dalle inquadrature della macchina da presa, come hanno osservato Liebrand (2009, 200–213) e Zimmermann (2009, 199): spazi aperti e ovali corrispondono al mondo incontaminato del mito, spazi chiusi e geometrici a quello razionalista e capitalista. Sulla contrapposizione fra mondo mitico irrazionale e mondo moderno razionale nella pellicola di Pasolini, cfr. in part. Rubino (2004) 101; Zimmermann (2009) 198.

capitalismo[13]: due mondi fra cui, secondo Pasolini stesso, non è possibile nessuna ‹sintesi hegeliana›[14].

FRANCESCO MASTRIANI E *LA MEDEA DI PORTA MEDINA*

Nell'ambito degli studi sulla ricezione moderna del mito di Medea in Italia, particolare attenzione merita il romanzo *La Medea di Porta Medina* di Francesco Mastriani (1819–1891), pubblicato postumo nel 1915. Vissuto in piena epoca risorgimentale, Mastriani fu autore di ben centosette romanzi d'appendice, tutti ambientati nell'area della Campania e di Napoli, e ascrivibili al movimento del Naturalismo Verista, diffuso alla fine del XIX secolo: nei suoi romanzi, infatti, egli dà voce a una società popolare segnata da contraddizioni sociali e morali. Il romanzo *La Medea di Porta Medina,* che si colloca nell'ultimo decennio della sua produzione, si inserisce pienamente in questo contesto, ma con un elemento di radicale novità: come ha infatti notato Pagliano (1993, 88), l'autore napoletano fa un innovativo uso del mito, che diventa un richiamo archetipico e classico per la storia di Coletta Esposito. Il romanzo merita attenzione nel campo degli studi della ricezione del mito di Medea perché si tratta della prima vera riscrittura moderna del mito redatta in prosa, di contro un repertorio di tragedie e rappresentazioni teatrali e melodrammatiche (soprattutto della fine del Settecento e dell'inizio dell'Ottocento), e perché sembra che il testo di Mastriani si ispiri a un fatto di cronaca realmente accaduto nella Napoli della fine del Settecento[15].

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13 A tal proposito sono interessanti le osservazioni di Fusillo (1996) 6–8, 157–160. Lo studioso osserva infatti che l'opposizione tra i due mondi è sottolineata sin dall'inizio del film, quando le immagini dell'educazione di Giasone da parte del centauro Chirone (Pasolini 1970, sc. 5–11, pp. 28–30) si sovrappongono a quelle del sacrificio umano officiato da Medea nella Colchide (Pasolini 1970, sc. 12, 14, 16–21, pp. 31–34). Sul tema, cfr. anche Ieranò (2000) 183–188; Carlà-Uhink (2008) 94, 100, 105.

14 Cfr. in part. Fusillo (1996) 137.

15 Sul rapporto con l'episodio di cronaca, cfr. in part. Pagliano (1993) 88; Pucci (2017) 158. In anni più recenti altri autori teatrali contemporanei hanno utilizzato fatti di cronaca per riscrivere il mito euripideo. In particolare, si ricordano gli spettacoli del regista e attore italiano Mimmo Borrelli, *La madre: ‹i figlie so› piezze 'i sfascimma* (2010) e *Malacrescita* (2011); e lo spettacolo NTGent dello svizzero Milo Rau, *Medea Kinderen,* che ha debuttato alla Biennale di Venezia nel 2024.

Proprio dal richiamo alla cronaca del tempo prende le mosse la narrazione, che si snoda per trenta capitoli, caratterizzati da una *climax* ascendente che tiene il lettore col fiato sospeso fino alla fine, se possibile ancora più tragica e impattante del modello euripideo. Nel primo capitolo si fa riferimento all'esposizione di sei teste di giustiziati, tre uomini e tre donne. Fra loro c'è Coletta, resasi colpevole di un terribile delitto. In ironica struttura circolare, l'ultimo capitolo ricorda le sante messe celebrate per riscattare le anime dei sei colpevoli, poco tempo prima esiliati e aborriti dalla stessa comunità che ora offre elemosine per la salvezza delle loro anime nell'aldilà. La storia di Coletta – sin da subito descritta come una bambina e ragazza dal carattere difficile e ‹cattivo›[16] – inizia il giorno della festa dell'Annunziata del 1792, quando l'Orfanotrofio dell'Annunziata apre le proprie porte per lasciare che le ragazze scelte in sposa escano. Fra loro c'è la protagonista, inizialmente promessa a un uomo anziano e malato, a cui si ribella. Nella fuga dallo sposo, importanti sono gli incontri con un'anziana donna – che poi si scoprirà essere la madre che l'aveva abbandonata alla ruota – e Cipriano. Con quest'ultimo, la Medea napoletana inizia una relazione: i due convivono – quasi un'empietà per la società del tempo – e hanno persino una figlia, senza che la loro unione venga regolarizzata dal matrimonio. Coletta non sembra preoccuparsi di quello che la gente mormora su di lei, ma è felice di vivere quell'unione clandestina con Cipriano e tutto sembra andare per il meglio, come in un idillio. Almeno finché non si insinua in lei terribile il seme della gelosia. Il compagno, infatti, nel frattempo incontra Teresina, che si può accostare all'anonimo personaggio di Glauce/Creusa del mito[17], e progetta di sposarla, alle spalle di Coletta, facendole credere di essere alle prese con l'organizzazione del loro matrimonio. Nel cap. 27 (pp. 247–261), intitolato *Il tradimento,* la protagonista scopre finalmente le trame del compagno, che fino a quel momento l'aveva raggirata. Nell'attesa dell'annullamento del precedente matrimonio con Nunzio

16 A tal proposito, è rilevante l'episodio, narrato nel cap. 2 *La scelta d'una sposa,* del giorno della festa dell'Annunziata, quando Coletta viene scelta dal vecchio Nunzio Pagliarella. L'autore descrive la reazione di forte opposizione della protagonista all'invito dell'uomo a raccogliere il fazzoletto appositamente fatto cadere a terra, Coletta *avvampò in viso, ma per vergogna e dispetto* […] *e lasciò cadere il fazzoletto senza raccoglierlo* (Mastriani 1988, 28). Può essere utile inoltre ricordare alcuni aggettivi utilizzati nelle prime pagine del romanzo: *riottosa* (p. 31), *invasata* (p. 39), *indemoniata* (p. 40) o ancora *demonio* (p. 45).

17 Il nome della figlia di Creonte non è mai menzionato nel dramma euripideo. Nelle opere successive, invece, si trovano alternati i nomi di Glauce e Creusa fin dall'antichità, cf. Sen. Med. 465; Hyg. fab. 25; Paus. 2,3,6.

Pagliarella[18], Coletta avverte una strana malinconia e un'insolita tristezza: Cipriano non fa arrivare da lei la cassa con la propria biancheria e torna spesso molto tardi la sera, ma ella, *quantunque avesse il cuore assai scuro per questi indugi al compimento dei suoi voti, vivea sicura in su la fedeltà del suo fidanzato; e, felice nell'amore che questi le simulava, aspettava con rassegnazione il giorno che dovea colmare tutt'i suoi desiderii* (Mastriani 1988, 249). Eppure, i suoi presentimenti vengono alla fine confermati dalla confidenza che le fa una vicina, che afferma, infatti, di essere venuta a sapere del matrimonio di Cipriano con Teresina. Inizialmente la protagonista non crede alle parole della donna, ma comunque riflette sugli insoliti comportamenti dell'amato (Mastriani 1988, 254):

> *noi crediamo che ella facesse poi nella mente sua un sommario raffronto di circostanze, le quali concorrevano tutte a rafforzare la veracità delle parole della lavandaia:*
>
> *L'indifferenza di Cipriano in quanto agli sponsali;*
>
> *L'essersi voluto egli stesso incaricare di mettere alla posta la lettera diretta alla signora Molisi, e che egli avea probabilmente lacerata;*
>
> *L'ignorare o fingere d'ignorare che la comunicazione della bolla papale era già arrivata in Napoli fin dallo scorcio del mese d'aprile;*
>
> *E finalmente le sue lunghe assenze dalla casa e da Napoli.*

Il mattino dopo, la protagonista incarica un'altra vicina di andare a verificare la notizia che le era stata confidata la sera prima e, ricevutane conferma, nella ‹lunga notte› del 18 maggio 1973 formula la sua vendetta[19]. Nel cap. 28 del romanzo, intitolato *Il dramma di Casoria*, l'autore descrive con dovizia di particolari lo stato d'animo del suo personaggio. Immedesimandosi completamente con Coletta, soprannominata significativamente ‹Medea›, egli ne descrive dapprima il tormento psicologico, causato dalla gelosia e dalla rabbia per il tradimento subito e dalla consapevolezza dell'atto atroce che si appresta a compiere, e poi la furia con cui dà pieno compimento ai suoi progetti. Viene riportato il rimuginare notturno della protagonista, che riprende, in modi meno tormentati, proprio il celebre monologo dei vv. 1021–1080 della tragedia di Euripide. Entrambe, Medea e Coletta, sono angosciate, scisse fra la volontà di vendetta e l'amore materno; tuttavia, la protagonista del romanzo di Mastriani è molto più risoluta rispetto al

18 Cfr. *supra* p. 7 n. 16.

19 L'indicazione esatta della data è fornita dall'autore, che, nel corso della narrazione, pone molta attenzione ai dettagli cronologici e spaziali.

modello euripideo: *ma la morte è il supplizio d'un momento – dové pensare tra sé la Medea di Porta Medina – ed io voglio che la ferita che io farò al cuore dell'infido sanguini per lungo spazio di tempo: io gli debbo trapassare il cuore con una freccia avvelenata che non lo uccida di colpo, ma che il faccia spasimare come un'anima dannata. Egli giurò su la vita di sua figlia di non tradirmi giammai, di non amare altra donna che me! Ebbene, egli è forza che lo spergiuro gli ricada sul capo. Colà, a pie' dell'altare, dinanzi al quale il traditore giurerà fedeltà e amore ad altra donna, quando le loro destre saranno congiunte dal ministro di Dio, gitterò ai suoi piedi il cadavere di sua figlia, e sotto agli occhi suoi gli svenerò la sposa* (Mastriani 1988, 262). L'autore mette poi in relazione il paesaggio naturale circostante con ciò che sta avvenendo sulla scena[20]: fuori è primavera, la stagione della rinascita, ma una creatura appena nata sta per sprofondare nel lungo inverno della morte per mano della stessa persona che l'ha generata e che la allatta significativamente al seno poco prima di ucciderla. Uno stratagemma narrativo molto efficace per sottolineare l'atrocità dell'episodio. In una campagna solitaria, Coletta uccide la figlia, che intanto – significativamente – invoca il padre e, come da progetto, subito dopo che i due sposini hanno pronunciato i voti, getta il suo cadavere ai loro piedi e accoltella la donna che ha preso il suo posto nel cuore di Cipriano.

Nel ‹monologo› interiore di Coletta Mastriani sembra riprendere fedelmente la psicologia della *rhesis* euripidea dei vv. 1021–1080: i punti di contatto fra i due passi sono infatti numerosi. Innanzitutto, entrambe le donne sono tradite e ingannate dai rispettivi compagni, con cui intrattengono una relazione amorosa non regolarizzata e non conforme alle regole del tempo. La maga colchica, infatti, era fuggita dalla sua patria senza ottenere il permesso del padre a sposare un uomo, per di più greco; Coletta, invece, pur essendo sposata con un altro uomo, ha una relazione con Cipriano. Inoltre, le due protagoniste sono lacerate dal conflitto tra l'amore materno e il desiderio di vendetta, e in entrambe la consapevolezza della colpa precede l'azione. Entrambe, poi, vengono raggirate da un uomo che si scopre spergiuro (cfr. Med. 1392 ψευδόρκου καὶ ξεναπάτου) e che hanno aiutato con tutti i mezzi che avevano a disposizione. Nel racconto mitico, infatti, Giasone deve il successo della sua impresa alle arti magiche di Medea[21]. Dal can-

20 Il contrasto fra l'idillio primaverile e l'irrompere della violenza richiama un procedimento tipico della sensibilità romantica e ripreso con forza dal melodramma ottocentesco.

21 In realtà, anche Medea sottolinea il proprio ruolo nel successo dell'impresa degli Argonauti nella Colchide ai vv. 475–495 dell' ἀγὼν λόγων, secondo una versione, tra l'altro, ben attestata in altre fonti del mito (cf. in part. Pind. P. 4,220–252, Apoll. Rhod. 3,1026–1062 e

to suo, Coletta si adopera per aiutare il compagno, in gravi difficoltà economiche. Tuttavia, la riflessione interiore della Medea napoletana si distingue per una determinazione maggiore, più risoluta e terrena[22]. A ciò contribuiscono probabilmente la tradizione drammatica napoletana e la prosa realistica, che, tra l'altro, trasfigurano la dimensione tragica: il dramma di Coletta non è più quello di una donna barbara colpevole di stregoneria – come avveniva nel modello euripideo – ma è il dramma di una donna del popolo che, tradita e umiliata, si vendica con la stessa lucida consapevolezza della Medea greca. Ma la ‹demitizzazione› del personaggio antico è solo apparente: dietro la cornice verista si nasconde lo stesso meccanismo tragico, fondato sull'ineluttabilità della decisione. A tal proposito, può forse essere utile osservare quante volte, nella tragedia euripidea, ricorra il concetto di ἀνάγκη (vv. 247, 806, 1013, 1062, 1240)[23]. Nel testo di Mastriani, invece, si possono osservare espressioni come *egli è forza che lo spergiuro gli ricada sul capo,* che rimanda alla medesima idea di ineluttabilità della vendetta.

EURIPIDE E MASTRIANI A CONFRONTO

Il romanzo di Mastriani offre quindi un altro aspetto della fortuna del dramma euripideo del 431 a.C., che può così fuoriuscire dal linguaggio tragico – dove fino ad allora era sempre stato relegato – e approdare a una prosa verista e a una cultura più popolare. Nel cap. 28, il monologo interiore di Coletta funziona

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[Apollod.] I 9,23). Pochi versi dopo, invece, Giasone, pieno d'ira nei confronti della ex-moglie – o meglio, pienamente convinto della superiorità maschile sulla donna – attribuisce il merito del successo alla dea Cipride e, quindi, all'*eros* che la dea dell'amore aveva instillato in Medea (vv. 526–531): ἐγὼ δ', ἐπειδὴ καὶ λίαν πυργοῖς χάριν, / Κύπριν νομίζω τῆς ἐμῆς ναυκληρίας / σώτειραν εἶναι θεῶν τε κἀνθρώπων μόνην. / σοὶ δ' ἔστι μὲν νοῦς λεπτός· ἀλλ' ἐπίφθονος / λόγος διελθεῖν ὡς Ἔρως σ' ἠνάγκασεν / τόξοις ἀφύκτοις τοὐμὸν ἐκσῶσαι δέμας, "io però, dal momento che enfatizzi troppo il (tuo) aiuto, credo che Cipride, fra gli dèi e gli uomini, sia stata l'unica salvatrice della mia spedizione. Tu hai una mente sottile. Ma (ti è) odioso il discorso, cioè, narrare come Eros ti ha costretta a salvare la mia persona con le sue inevitabili frecce". Sul tema, cfr. Paduano (1968) 234; Martina (1997) 23; Hopman (2008) 158.

22 Verosimile è l'influenza del modello senecano (cfr. *infra* p. 14).

23 Tra l'altro, i vv. 1062 e 1240 – che ricorrono identici in due differenti parti del testo, causando non pochi problemi critici – esprimono esattamente lo stesso concetto: "l'assoluta necessità" che i figli muoiano.

come riscrittura ‹borghese› del grande monologo euripideo: entrambi esplorano la tensione fra maternità e vendetta. D'altra parte, i due testi vanno inquadrati in due culture sociologicamente differenti: la protagonista napoletana di Mastriani si muove in un orizzonte sociale e culturale completamente diverso sia all'interno del romanzo – ambientato negli anni immediatamente successivi alla Rivoluzione francese – sia al suo esterno, all'epoca in cui visse Mastriani, influenzata dal clima risorgimentale e positivista della fine dell'Ottocento[24].

Nella tragedia euripidea, il monologo dei vv. 1021–1080 segna il culmine del dramma psicologico dell'eroina: in esso Medea dialoga col proprio θυμός (parola-chiave del monologo)[25], quell'‹istinto› che già nella cultura greca arcaica agiva come forza emotiva interna all'individuo. L'eroina esprime la propria scissione fra un istinto materno ‹sano›, che la spingerebbe a non uccidere i bambini, considerati proprietà dei genitori, e un istinto materno ‹velenoso›, ferito dal tradimento del marito, che la spinge a commettere il figlicidio[26]. Infatti, come già accadeva nei poemi omerici – che il personaggio di Medea sovente richiama[27] – il dialogo interiore dell'eroina euripidea ha il fine di dare voce alla lacerazione che la consapevolezza dell'atto comporta. Medea non sta decidendo il da farsi: la decisione, d'altronde, è già stata presa da tempo e sono stati Creonte, Egeo e persino lo stesso Giasone a portarla nella direzione del figlicidio, tanto più che i dialoghi con i tre personaggi maschili della tragedia, infatti, non hanno altro fine che quello di far capire alla protagonista quanto sia importante per un uomo avere una discendenza. Il monologo mette in scena la piena coscienza della sofferenza che deriverà dalla decisione che Medea ha già preso, come le

24 Cfr. *infra* pp. 17–18.

25 Il dialogo col proprio θυμός è una prassi molto presente già nei poemi omerici, dove spesso l'eroe si rivolge ad esso quando si trova in condizioni di particolare difficoltà e deve scegliere fra due alternative, entrambe con conseguenze nefaste. Per i monologhi omerici, cfr. in part. Di Benedetto (1994) 156–174. In particolare, il monologo di Medea si avvicina molto al terzo tipo di monologo individuato da Di Benedetto (1994,159), in cui il personaggio non perviene a nessuna decisione. Esso risulta il più formalizzato fra tutti ed è caratterizzato da un'evoluzione progressiva dal primo (Il. 11,404–410, in cui parla Odisseo) all'ultimo (Il. 22,99–130, in cui parla Ettore). Cfr. in part. Diller (1969) 271; Burnett (1998) 280–281.

26 Il riferimento è ai vv. 1078–1080 (cfr. *infra* p. 13), sui cui si è molto discusso. Cfr. in part. Diller (1966); Reeve (1972); Kovacs (1989) 343–352; Battezzato (1991) 420–436; più di recente Lentini (2020) 387–399.

27 Cfr. in part. Knox (1977) 196; Lentini (2020) 361–362.

aveva già anticipato il Coro ai vv. 811–816. In particolare, sono significativi i versi della seconda metà della *rhesis* (vv. 1067–1080), che, con il commovente saluto ai bambini, condensano questa duplicità. L'eroina immagina di ornarne le nozze, il talamo nuziale, invoca le loro carissime mani e il loro dolcissimo respiro, ma subito dopo ritorna sui propri passi e prende definitivamente la decisione di ucciderli, pienamente convinta del fatto che è "assolutamente necessario che muoiano e, poiché è necessario, io che li ho generati, li ucciderò" (vv. 1062s.)[28]:

ἀλλ', εἶμι γὰρ δὴ τλημονεστάτην ὁδὸν
καὶ τούσδε πέμψω τλημονεστέραν ἔτι,
παῖδας προσειπεῖν βούλομαι· δότ', ὦ τέκνα,
δότ' ἀσπάσασθαι μητρὶ δεξιὰν χέρα.
ὦ φιλτάτη χείρ, φίλτατον δέ μοι στόμα
καὶ σχῆμα καὶ πρόσωπον εὐγενὲς τέκνων.
εὐδαιμονοῖτον, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖ· τὰ δ' ἐνθάδε
πατὴρ ἀφείλετ'· ὦ γλυκεῖα προσβολή,
ὦ μαλθακὸς χρὼς πνεῦμά θ' ἥδιστον τέκνων.
χωρεῖτε χωρεῖτ'· οὐκέτ' εἰμὶ προσβλέπειν
οἵα τε †πρὸς ὑμᾶς† ἀλλὰ νικῶμαι κακοῖς.
καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα τολμήσω κακά,
θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων,
ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἴτιος κακῶν βροτοῖς[29].

28 Si può forse ravvisare un'eco del mito precedente (cf. *supra* p. 3 n. 4), dove i bambini venivano uccisi dai Corinzi per vendicarsi del torto subito da Medea. Nella tragedia euripidea i figli devono morire affinché non siano i Corinzi a ucciderli, ed è l'eroina stessa a rendersi portavoce del patrimonio mitico precedente ogni qual volta esprime l'ἀνάγκη della loro morte.

29 "Ma io ormai percorro una strada sventuratissima e manderò questi su (una strada) ancora più sventurata; voglio salutare i bambini; date, date, o figli, la mano destra alla madre perché possa abbracciarla. O mano carissima, e carissima bocca, e aspetto, e nobile volto dei figli. Sarete felici, ma là: le cose di qua vostro padre (ve) le ha portate via; o dolce contatto, tenera pelle e dolcissimo respiro dei figli. Andate, andate: non riesco più a volgere lo sguardo verso di voi, sono annientata dai mali. E capisco quali mali dovrò sostenere, ma la passione, che è causa di grandi mali per i mortali, è superiore ai miei propositi". Il testo è quello dell'edizione più recente di Martina (2018) II 65.

Significativi sono gli enigmatici vv. 1078–1080, che da sempre hanno catturato l'attenzione di studiosi, filosofi e autori[30].

Accanto al modello euripideo – in particolare nella formulazione del monologo interiore del cap. 28 (cfr. *supra* p. 9) – non si può escludere che Mastriani avesse presente la Medea senecana[31]: nei toni e nella freddezza di Coletta, infatti, sembra di avvertire l'eco dei versi della tragedia senecana. L'autore latino, d'altronde, si preoccupa sin da subito di offrire una rappresentazione assai negativa della sua protagonista, presentandola sin dai primi versi come una megera assetata di sangue e vittima del *furor* vendicativo e amoroso (vv. 13, 17–19): *nunc, nunc adeste, sceleris ultrices deae … coniugi letum nouae / letumque socero et regiae stirpi date. / Mihi peius aliquid, quod precer sponso malum,* "ora, ora statemi vicino, dee vendicatrici del delitto … date la morte alla nuova sposa, morte al suocero e alla regale stirpe. Per me qualcosa di peggio che io possa augurare allo sposo". Significativo è anche il monologo conclusivo della tragedia, che anticipa l'estremo atto di *hybris* dei vv. 1024–1025: *recipe iam natos, parens; / ego inter auras aiti curru uehar,* "tieniti pure i figli, padre; io me ne andrò attraverso l'aria su un cocchio alato". A questo punto dell'azione scenica la protagonista getta i cadaveri dei figli ai piedi dell'ex marito, il quale conclude la tragedia con una vera e propria antiapoteosi (vv. 1026s.): *per alta uide spatia sublimi aetheris, / testare nullos esse, qui ueheris, deos,* "vattene per gli alti spazi del cielo, ad attestare che laddove tu passi non esistono dèi"[32].

30 Sul monologo euripideo, cfr. in part. Battezzato (1995). Sui vv. 1021–1080 è stata prodotta un'ampia bibliografia, soprattutto in séguito all'osservazione di Bergk (1884, 512 n. 140), il quale, richiamandosi a un'idea già cinquecentesca (cfr. Manuzio 1579, 279–281), aveva ipotizzato che i vv. 1056–1080 fossero pervenuti in una doppia redazione. Sulla cosiddetta *Ur-Medea*, cfr. in part. Colomo (2011) 45–51; Luppe (2011) 48–50; Magnani (2014) 85–108 e (2021) 495–506.

31 Cfr. s*upra* p. 11 n. 22.

32 Sulla tragedia senecana, cfr. in part. Biondi (1984) e (1989) 61 e 165 n. 173.

CONCLUSIONI

La Medea di Porta Medina di Mastriani rappresenta dunque una tappa significativa della ricezione ottocentesca e moderna del mito, dalla tragedia alla narrativa verista. L'autore, infatti, trasferendo il linguaggio mitico del dramma euripideo al linguaggio realistico e morale del romanzo d'appendice, traduce la scissione psichica euripidea in un conflitto di natura sociale e sentimentale, dove il θυμός – inteso però come passione irrazionale – ha effettivamente la meglio sulla razionalità. Quel θυμός che in Euripide era una sorta di *alter-ego* della protagonista, in Mastriani si identifica con la gelosia che guida Coletta nella vendetta al tradimento subito, in un mondo che l'ha sempre emarginata e che non le concede né voce, né riscatto.

Attraverso la figura di Coletta Esposito, Mastriani traduce la tensione tragica in linguaggio realistico, restituendo alla *Medea* un orizzonte nuovo: il romanzo d'appendice, così, si fa luogo di ricezione e reinterpretazione del mito classico, trasferendo la ritualità del linguaggio tragico alla quotidianità della sfera privata e popolare. Sia Medea, sia Coletta agiscono all'interno di un contesto che le esclude e le giudica. Tuttavia, se in Euripide l'eroina è giudicata dai Corinzi, offesi per l'uccisione di Creonte e della principessa – considerata una trasgressione sociale – e non tanto per l'uccisione dei figli (per i quali, tra l'altro, Medea afferma di voler istituire un culto presso il santuario di Era Akraia[33]), in Mastriani l'atto empio della protagonista è percepito diversamente: l'uccisione della sposa può risultare comprensibile al lettore popolare, mentre il figlicidio è assolutamente inaccettabile. A ciò si aggiunge anche un'importante differenza fra i due autori: nel romanzo di Mastriani l'atto commesso dalla protagonista diventa espressione di un sentimento di gelosia che nel modello euripideo è in realtà assente. Infatti, sebbene in entrambi i casi la decisione del figlicidio non sia improvvisa e istintiva, per l'eroina di Euripide è la risposta estrema alla violazione della ξενία e della τιμή, commessa da Giasone; per Coletta, invece, è pura espressione di gelosia.

33 Cf. vv. 1378–1381: οὐ δῆτ', ἐπεί σφας τῇδ' ἐγὼ θάψω χερί, / φέρουσ' ἐς Ἥρας τέμενος Ἀκραίας θεοῦ, / ὡς μή τις αὐτοὺς πολεμίων καθυβρίσῃ / τυμβοὺς ἀνασπῶν, "no, perché io li seppellirò con questa mano, portandoli nel santuario di Era, la dea Acraia, cosicché nessuno dei nemici possa oltraggiarli, aprendo i tumuli".

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Rezension von Christopher Schliephake, Gregor Weber (Hrsg.): *Deutungskämpfe um die antike Divination im Spiegel spätrepublikanischer und kaiserzeitlicher Texte*

De Gruyter Oldenbourg (Berlin/Boston 2024)
(= Historische Zeitschrift Beihefte 81), 250 S.
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Mit der Divination ist das 81. Beiheft der Historischen Zeitschrift einem Forschungsbereich gewidmet, welcher nach langer Vernachlässigung erst seit einigen wenigen Jahrzehnten mehr Aufmerksamkeit erhält. Hervorgegangen ist der Band dabei aus einer Sektion gleichen Namens des 53. Historikertags, welcher vom 5. bis 8. Oktober 2021 eigentlich in München stattfinden sollte, für den aufgrund der Pandemiebedingungen allerdings noch ein rein digitales Format gewählt wurde. Ursprünglich umfasste die besagte Sektion drei Beträge von Andree Hahmann, Christopher Schliephake und Rafał Matuszewski. Gregor Weber übernahm die Sektionsleitung und Sara Chiarini den abschließenden Kommentar. Für die vorliegende Publikation wurde der Band um fünf weitere Beiträge von Ursula Bittrich, Tanja Itgenshorst, Meret Strothmann sowie eben Gregor Weber und Sara Chiarini ergänzt.

Das Ziel sowohl der Sektion als auch der vorliegenden Publikation wird im Vorwort klar definiert. Es soll der Versuch unternommen werden, „am Bei-

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spiel ausgewählter Autoren und Texte des 1. bis 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. zu diskutieren, wie diese mit dem Thema der Divination umgingen, und herauszuarbeiten, welche konkreten sozialen und kulturellen Rahmenbedingungen zur Auseinandersetzung mit diesem Anlass gaben. Dabei soll insbesondere aufgezeigt werden, welche Deutungskonflikte sich im Laufe der frühen Kaiserzeit entwickelten und wie diese zur Entwicklung (oder Problematisierung) von Expertenwissen beitrugen."[1]

Die von Schliephake und Weber gemeinsam verfasste Einführung zerfällt wie üblich in zwei Teile. Der erste bietet einen gelungenen Überblick über den Stand der Forschung sowie weiterführende Perspektiven. Der Fokus liegt korrekterweise nicht alleine auf den staatlich vereinnahmten Formen der Divination, sondern besonders auf frei praktizierenden Individuen, deren nicht zu unterschätzender Einfluss aufgrund der vielfältigen tatsächlichen und potentiellen Deutungskonflikte wiederum auf die literarische Produktion zurückwirkte. Der zweite Teil der Einleitung fasst dann den wesentlichen Inhalt der insgesamt acht Beiträge zusammen.[2]

Der Titel des ersten Aufsatzes von Andree Hahmann lautet *Deutungsfreie Wahrsagung in Ciceros „De divinatione"? Zeichen und Deutung in natürlicher und künstlicher Wahrsagung*. Die Absicht des Autors ist es aufzuzeigen, dass die im ersten Buch der besagten Schrift von der Figur des Quintus wiedergegebene Position für eine Existenz der Divination nicht alleine auf einer stoischen Argumentation beruht. Der vom Autor dabei gewählte Ausgangspunkt ist allerdings sehr problematisch. Denn Hahmann schreibt mehrfach, die von ihm behandelte Zweiteilung der Divination sei vor Cicero unbekannt.[3] Allerdings wird eine Zweiteilung der Divination bereits in Platons *Phaidros* ausdrücklich beschrieben. Tatsächlich handelt es sich bei diesem Dialog um die von der Forschung am stärksten diskutierte Quelle hinsichtlich der exakten Natur der besagten Zweiteilung, welche auch in dem vorliegenden Aufsatz immer wieder problematisiert wird (natürlich technisch, göttlich/menschlich, wissenschaftlich/unwissenschaftlich etc.).[4] In seinem gesamten Beitrag bezieht Hahmann Platon

1 S. 7.

2 Im Band selbst (S. 19) ist fälschlicherweise von sieben Beiträgen die Rede.

3 Vgl. S. 31 und 39.

4 Plat. Phaidr. 244b–d; Hahmann erwähnt die Stelle zwar in Anm. 21, würdigt sie aber nur mit wenigen Worten, da sie und die entsprechende Stelle bei Cicero nichts miteinander zu tun hätten. Zu der Verbindung zwischen Cicero und Platon sowie der Zentralität des *Phaidros* für die moderne Forschungsdiskussion vgl. hingegen bspw.: R. Flacelière, *Greek Oracles* (London 1976) 4; S. I. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Oxford 2008) 8 f.; K. Beerden, *A Worlds Full of Signs. Ancient Greek Divination in Context* (Leiden/Boston 2013) 22.

jedoch nicht in seine Argumentation ein. Dies ist besonders deswegen schwer nachvollziehbar, weil seine These, dass Quintus eben keine explizit stoische Position wiedergibt, anhand der platonischen Schrift doch sehr plausibel wird.

Im zweiten Beitrag widmet sich Meret Strothmann dem Lehrgedicht *Astronomica* des Manilius. Der Titel *„Ratio omnia vincit" (Man. 4,932) oder: wie Manilius den Kosmokrator Augustus unterstützte* spiegelt die Argumentation der Autorin wider. Das besagte Werk wird als eine Schrift gedeutet, welche „Sterne und Sternenkonstellationen für die Herrschaft des Augustus brauchbar" machte.[5] Für die Zeit der Republik stellt die Autorin derartige Deutungskämpfe pauschal in Abrede bzw. stellt die These auf, sie seien erst durch Ciceros *De divinatione* möglich geworden, was eine viel zu stark an der uns zufällig erhalten gebliebenen Literatur ausgerichtete Interpretation darstellt. Im Rahmen des Aufsatzes dient diese der Erzeugung eines Kontrastbildes zu Manilius' Text, für den Strothmann eine ausdrücklich politisierende Interpretation vorlegt. Die erste Frage, die für eine solche zweifelsfrei geklärt sein müsste, ist aber die der Datierung. Hier existieren starke Hinweise darauf, dass der Text des Manilius erst in den letzten Lebensjahren des Augustus oder vermutlich sogar erst unter Tiberius abgefasst wurde, was in der Forschung seit langem diskutiert wird.[6] Generell ist die Berücksichtigung einschlägiger Forschungsliteratur durch die Autorin wenig umfangreich. Deutlich wird dies auch an der Art und Weise, wie Strothmann die Rolle Apollons mit in ihre Interpretation einbezieht, welcher als „Schutzgottheit" des Augustus schon immer in einer engen Beziehung zur Divination gestanden habe. Bei dieser sehr korrekten Betonung der mantischen Funktionen Apollons handelt es sich im Rahmen der Forschung zu Augustus tatsächlich aber noch immer keineswegs um eine Mehrheitsmeinung. Zudem wird diese im Rahmen neuester Forschungen stark von der Person des Augustus getrennt und mit der wichtigen römischen Priesterschaft der *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* verbunden, welche mit den berühmten Sibyllinischen Büchern für die Auslegung Roms eigener Orakel verantwortlich war und die Deutungshoheit über diese Texte besaß.[7] Gerade hinsichtlich der zentralen Fragestellung des vorliegenden Bandes hätte die Einbeziehung dieser

5 S. 74.

6 Der Text besitzt mit der Varusschlacht einen deutlichen *terminus post* quem; E. Gebhardt, ‚Zur Datierungsfrage des Manilius', *RhM* 104 (1961) 278–286, 279; B. Baldwin, ‚Dating Manilius' Astronomica', *Maia* 39 (1987) 101–103.

7 Vgl.: J. Fischer, *Folia ventis turbata. Sibyllinische Orakel und der Gott Apollon zwischen später Republik und augusteischem Principat* (Göttingen 2022), besonders S. 84–90 und 261–337.

neuen Erkenntnisse folglich zu überaus interessanten, genuin neuartigen und weiterführenden Interpretationen führen können. Diese Möglichkeit wurde leider versäumt.

Tanja Itgenshorsts Aufsatz *Zwischen* pietas *und* necessitudo. *Deutungskämpfe um die antike Divination bei Valerius Maximus* fokussiert mit den *Facta et dicta memorabilia* dann eines der wohl buntesten Werke der kaiserzeitlichen Literatur. Dennoch gelingt es der Autorin im Rahmen ihres stringenten Ansatzes, schlüssige Erkenntnisse herauszuarbeiten, welche sie abschließend in zwei Kategorien gruppiert. Zum einen fänden sich bei Valerius Konflikte um die Auslegung divinatorischer Autorität im Rahmen machtbezogener Bereiche wie den Auspizien von Feldherren oder zentraler republikanischer Institutionen wie dem Senat. Zum anderen gehe eben diese Form der Autorität mit den Anfängen des Prinzipats gewissermaßen unmittelbar auf die neuen Herrscher über, deren Handeln nun ohne die Notwendigkeit einer Deutung im Einklang mit dem Willen der Götter erscheine. Itgenshorst kann somit überzeugend aufzeigen, wie die Behandlung und eben Deutung divinatorischer Prozesse in unseren Quellen nicht zuletzt immer auch einen Rückschluss auf die politischen Verhältnisse in der tatsächlichen Lebensrealität des Autors erlaubt.

Konflikte um Traum und Traumdeutung in den Schriften Plutarchs von Chaironeia sind das zentrale Thema des folgenden Beitrags des Mitherausgebers Christopher Schliephake. Bei diesem handelt es sich um den ersten von insgesamt drei Aufsätzen des Bandes, welche Aspekte der Traumdeutung untersuchen, was trotz der Bedeutung dieser Divinationsform ein Ungleichgewicht hinsichtlich der Komposition des Bandes darstellt. Dennoch betont Schliephake am Beginn seines Beitrages vollkommen zurecht, dass dieser auch bei Plutarch immer wieder begegnenden Thematik im direkten Vergleich mit anderen Gebieten der Divination und vor allem der Orakel bisher nicht genügend Aufmerksamkeit zuteilwurde. Der gut strukturierte und methodisch fundierte Beitrag füllt somit eine Forschungslücke und kann dabei vor allem aufzeigen, dass es sich um ein deutliches Versäumnis handelte. Denn wie Schliephake treffend feststellt, sind eben auch Träume Medien, deren Auslegung bei Prozessen der (politischen) Entscheidungsfindung den Ausschlag geben konnte.

Der unmittelbar darauffolgende zweite Beitrag des Bandes, welcher sich Träumen und ihrer Deutung zuwendet, trägt den alleine schon aus diesem Grund überaus treffenden Titel *Doppelte Traumarbeit. Deutenswertes und seine Deutung durch Autor und Leser der „Hieroi Logoi" des Aelius Aristides* und stammt von Ursula Bittrich. In seinem Rahmen analysiert die Autorin Träume hauptsächlich als immanenten Bestandteil der behandelten Schrift des Aelius Aristides, welche der Autor vor allem

als narratologisches Mittel der Leserlenkung nutze. So korrekt dieser Blickwinkel auf unsere Quelle sicherlich ist, so wenig verrät er uns doch über die konkrete gesellschaftliche und kulturelle Rolle der Auslegung von Träumen. Kaum einmal wagt die Autorin in ihrem Beitrag den Blick über die Schrift hinaus in die Lebensrealität der Zeitgenossen, welche doch, wie oben dargelegt, „im Spiegel" der behandelten Texte den eigentlichen Untersuchungsgegenstand des Bandes darstellt.

Sara Chiarini wiederum geht in ihrem Aufsatz *Divination zwischen Philosophie- und Religionskritik in den Werken Lukians von Samosata* genau diesen Schritt, auch wenn sie hierbei zurecht größte Vorsicht walten lässt und gleich am Beginn feststellt, die in Lukians Schriften geäußerten Ansichten dürften keinesfalls mit der tatsächlichen Meinung des Autors gleichgesetzt werden. Nichtsdestotrotz demonstriert dessen Werk, wie die Autorin überzeugend aufzeigen kann, die von einigen Zeitgenossen empfundene Nähe von Philosophen und Wahrsagern, welche die Deutungshoheit über vermeintliche Wahrheiten für sich reklamieren, ohne sich derer selbst vollkommen sicher zu sein.

Rafał Matuszewki ist dann schließlich der dritte Autor des Bandes, welcher sich unter dem lakonischen Titel *Deutungskämpfe in Artemidors „Oneirokritika"* ebenfalls dem Bereich der Traumdeutung zuwendet. Hierbei nimmt Matuszewski allerdings einen dezidiert anderen Blickwinkel ein als seine Vorgänger. Ihm nämlich geht es vor allem darum aufzuzeigen, in welcher Art und Weise Artemidor sein Werk in den „Kampfplatz" der unterschiedlichen Ansätze der verschiedensten Experten einbettete und wie er sich auf diesem bei seinem literarischen Versuch methodisch und argumentativ behauptete.[8] Nach Ansicht des Rezensenten bedient Matuszewski mit dieser Vorgehensweise die übergeordnete Fragestellung des Bandes am unmittelbarsten und gewährt uns dabei einen wertvollen Einblick in die tatsächlich sehr rigoros ausgefochtenen zeitgenössischen „Deutungskämpfe um die antike Divination".

Der Titel des abschließenden Beitrags von Gregor Weber, *Deutungskämpfe in den Zauberpapyri des 1. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. bis zum Ende des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.? Strategien für die Schaffung von Autorität und Erfolg*, erweckt wiederum zunächst ein gewisses Befremden, werden die in den Zauberpapyri erhaltenen Texte doch auch von der jüngeren Forschung zumeist noch immer dem Bereich der Magie zugeordnet und somit oft streng von der Divination abgegrenzt. Demgegenüber wurde allerdings bereits häufig aufgezeigt, dass eben diese Trennung viel stärker auf der Einnahme einer modernen (etischen) Perspektive, als auf einem zeitgenössischen (emischen) Verständnis

8 S. 215.

basiert. Demgemäß sind die Überschneidungen zwischen diesen zwei Gebieten auch derart häufig und gravierend, dass sich eine auf der Trennung der zwei Gebiete basierende Methodik schnell den größten Problemen ausgesetzt sieht. Vor dem zeitgenössischen Hintergrund handelt es sich demnach bei Webers Beitrag im Rahmen des Bandes eben keineswegs um eine Art ‚Fremdkörper', sondern um die konsequente Zusammenführung von Phänomenen, die zusammengehören. In seinem Verlauf kann der Autor dabei aufzeigen, dass auch diese Texte einer ganz eigenen Form von Deutungskampf ausgesetzt waren, welcher allerdings nicht expliziter, sondern vielmehr impliziter Natur war. Denn die verschiedenen Sprüche nahmen für sich in Anspruch, der jeweils wirksamste Zauber für die Erreichung eines bestimmten Ziels zu sein, was wiederum zumindest ein paar vorsichtige Rückschlüsse auf das kompetitive Milieu erlaubt, in welchem sie ursprünglich entstanden und zirkulierten.

Ein kurzes, aber nützliches Register schließt den Band ab. Auf ein gesondertes Literaturverzeichnis, welches einen echten Mehrwert dargestellt hätte, wurde leider verzichtet. Die vollständigen Literaturangaben finden sich stattdessen alleine in den Fußnoten.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich festhalten, dass der Band einen nicht nur wichtigen, sondern auch hochaktuellen Zweig der altertumswissenschaftlichen Forschung bedient. Leider wird er dieser Bedeutung und vor allem dem großen Potential des Themas in der vorliegenden Form aber nur bedingt gerecht. So wird etwa mit der Thematik der Orakel gerade jenes Gebiet der antiken Divination nur gelegentlich berührt, in welchem der Auslegung und Deutung von Texten doch eine zentrale Bedeutung zukam. Demgegenüber beschäftigen sich drei von acht Beträgen mit der zwar ebenfalls sehr wichtigen, auf diese Weise jedoch überrepräsentierten Traumdeutung. Hochkarätige Beiträge stehen unmittelbar neben solchen, welche einen deutlichen Gewinn aus einem strengeren Peer Review hätten ziehen können. Trotz dieser Schwächen handelt es sich aber doch insofern um eine richtungsweisende Publikation, als sie die Breite möglicher und bisher unbeantworteter Fragestellungen und somit die Dringlichkeit weiterer Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der antiken Divination demonstriert.

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