MAKING SENSE OF ANCIENT PERFORMANCE

Vayos Liapis, Costas Panayotakis, and George W.M. Harrison

It is notoriously difficult to define “performance”, and it is with some hesitation that the decision was made to adopt the term in this volume’s title. Indeed, it has been argued that, far from being susceptible of a satisfactory definition, performance is an intrinsically contested concept: continuing debate and constructive disagreement are inherent in its very nature, thereby necessitating the use of different and often competing conceptual frameworks. For the purposes of this volume, “performance” is to be understood as including all non-verbal means used to establish or promote theatrical representation and the concomitant production of meaning. As such, “performance” refers not only to acting or stage business, but also to what Aristotle broadly described as *opsis* (ἐπίσης),\(^3\) namely all non-verbal constituents of ancient theatre: these include (but are not limited to) masks, costumes, props, scenography, song and music, theatrical space and the use made of it, and physical surroundings (not just the performance spaces themselves but also such features of the surrounding topography as could be meaningfully exploited by the playwrights). A number of additional elements also come under this category: gesture, stage-directions (explicit or implicit in the script), attribution of speaking parts, rehearsals—and even modern or contemporary attitudes and approaches to the staging of Greek and Roman theatre.

For a long time, Aristotle’s presumed dismissal of *opsis* in his *Poetics* made it all too easy for text-centred scholarship to overlook the physical dimensions that bring the words to life and condition audience reception of the spectacle. This view, however, is forcefully contested by G.M. Sifakis in

---

1 Section I of the Introduction was written by Vayos Liapis; section III by Vayos Liapis and George W.M. Harrison; the editors invited Costas Panayotakis to contribute section II of the Introduction, and are extremely grateful for his participation.


3 For a discussion of Aristotle’s use of ἐπίσης see Sifakis, this volume.
this volume, in a paper that follows in the wake of his earlier publications; a similar view is taken by Konstan in his own chapter in this volume. Moreover, thanks to thorough, original and often ground-breaking scholarly research during the last five decades, scholars have begun aggressively to expand their interpretative horizons to explore the impact of the performative aspect on the ways in which plays are constructed and appreciated. More recently, classicists have turned to theoretical issues related to performance (e.g. performance analysis, or semiotics of performance). A prime example of this kind of approach is Revermann (2006a), an erudite and theoretically sophisticated study of Aristophanic dramaturgy (and often of Greek drama in general), which seeks to assign configurations and taxonomies of meaning to specific theatrical codes and practices, as far as these can be reconstructed from the dramatic scripts or from material evidence.

Playwrights, directors and actors know that re-animating the theatrical text for performance is a fascinating experience fraught with creative pitfalls and possibilities. Scholars who set themselves the difficult task of reconstructing ancient performances surely experience the same frustration and exhilaration. They additionally must face the further challenge of piecing together evidence for performance that is all too often fragmentary, unclear, ambiguous, and sometimes even contradictory, even though it sometimes allows precious glimpses into attitudes to the classical repertoire. This volume is devoted to using historical and archaeological, as well as textual, insights to reconstruct as closely as possible the conditions of ancient performance. It also invites reflection on the methodological problems of reconstructing the original physical conditions of the performance of ancient plays. Moreover, it addresses issues of performance history, both in antiquity and in modern times.

I. Ancient Greek Theatre and Performance Criticism

Performance Space and Its Uses

Emphasis on the performative aspects of ancient (predominantly Greek) theatre was a development of the 1960s, pioneered by (rather appropriately)

---

5 Cf. in particular Arnott (1962); Hourmouziades (1965), Taplin (1977b); Wiles (1997) and (2007); also, the contributions in Goldhill and Osborne (1999) and in Easterling and Hall (2002).