

The Reception of Greek Drama in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Introduction

The history of the reception of Greek drama in the Low Countries is, as elsewhere, a history of variety. Next to each other one may find superficial borrowings, erudite and empathic translations, and brutal adaptations. In her study of French tragedy adaptations from the *fin de siècle*, Sylvie Humbert-Mougin notes that the intensive examination of Greek drama was first and foremost a symptom of a brooding crisis within the theater itself (2003: 12).

This observation will serve as a guideline for my approach. Why did contemporary playwrights and directors *need* the Greek dramatists? What did Euripides, Sophocles, and (to a much lesser extent) Aeschylus and Aristophanes have to offer that contemporary drama could not provide? How did such peculiar drama texts, written in a language that already to the Athenians sounded archaic and solemn, and were intended for an open-air stage that had almost nothing in common with the modern theater, still kindle the imagination of the moderns?

For the purpose of this contribution, a bibliography of Dutch translations of Greek drama was composed, and a theatrography of performances produced in the Netherlands and Flanders.¹ Based on these data, a number of general observations can be formulated, which will form the basis of this chapter.

Before the nineteenth century, Dutch translations of Greek drama were published only sporadically. By 1800, some 11 translations had appeared, only of tragedies. In the course of the next century, six times as many translations would be produced. It was an abrupt development: while initially only a few translations per decade were published, that number suddenly rose to 14 in the 1880s. Since then, the cultural presence of the Greeks became an established fact. By the end of the twentieth century, more than 260 translations and adaptations had become

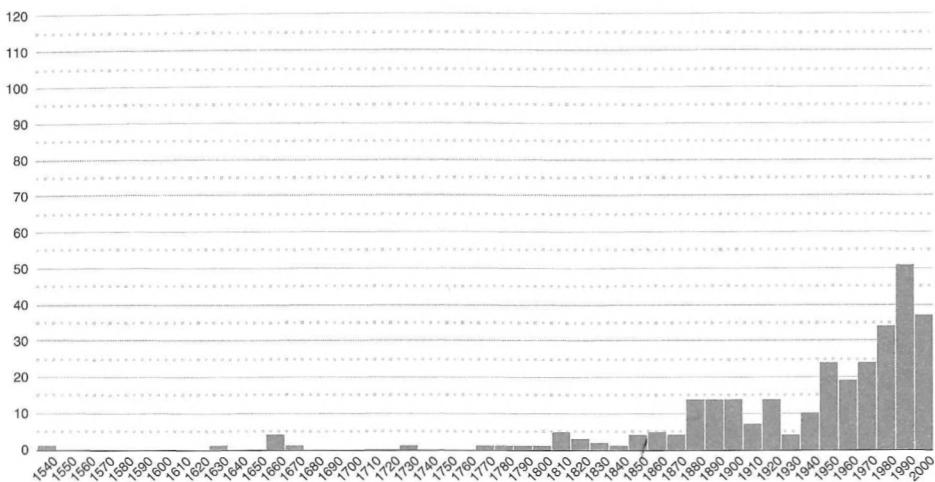


Figure 14.1 Translations per ten-year period.

available. To bring Greek tragedy to the Dutch-speaking reader apparently only became relevant and desirable *after* the age of Romanticism.

In Figure 14.1, which presents the publication frequency of translations, three notable peaks stand out. The first one concerns the *fin de siècle*. Between 1880 and 1910, no fewer than 41 plays were translated (among which, for the first time, a significant number of comedies, with seven plays by Aristophanes). A second peak is situated just after World War II (43 translations between 1945 and 1965). The third, most spectacular peak occurred in the 1980s and 1990s (85 translations).

The theatrography confirms these trends. The frequency of the number of stage productions echoes the frequency of published translations. Figure 14.2 traces the frequency with which Greek drama is brought on stage, and shows that the level of interest in ancient drama starts to rise during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Theatrical productions are (obviously) a little slower to follow the new trend of *anticomanie* than the translations. While there are four or more translations coming out per decade from the 1850s onwards, performances are still few and far between. The frequency remains low during the *fin de siècle* and the interwar period. Only after World War II does the level of interest start to rise up to 30 productions and more per decade.

A second trend is the huge increase in the number of productions during the 1980s, and especially during the 1990s. To some extent, this has to do with the way in which the data were collected. These decades coincide with the start of the systematic inventorization of theatrical productions by both the Dutch Theatre Institute (TIN) and the Flemish Theatre Institute (VTI). For the previous decades, there is simply less information available.²

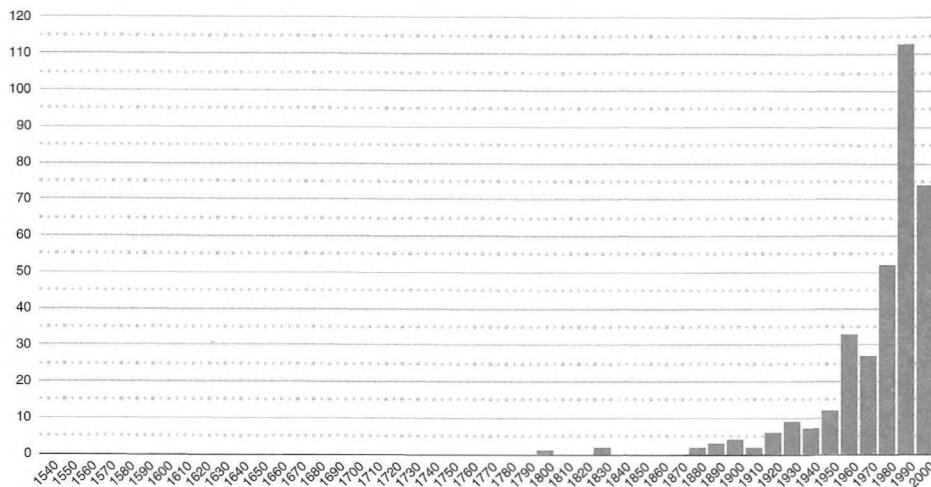


Figure 14.2 Productions per ten-year period.

Nevertheless, the trend is so pronounced that it cannot but correspond to a factual shift in the field of the performing arts. Actually, the number of productions doubled twice in succession: first, when comparing the 1980s to the 1970s, and the second time when comparing the 1990s to the 1980s.

In the following section, I will first sketch the “pre-history” of the reception of Greek drama (from the Renaissance up to the end of the eighteenth century). The second section discusses the nineteenth century, starting from 1779, a time when not only the *ancien régime* is drawing to a close, but also a new wave of Dutch translation efforts is taking off. From the third section onwards (which discusses the *fin de siècle* and interwar period), it has become common practice to stage ancient dramas. The fourth section discusses the postwar period (1945–1970) and the final section focuses on “postdramatic” theater since 1970 (Lehmann 2006).

The Eighteenth Century and Earlier

By the end of the seventeenth century, nine Dutch translations of Seneca’s Latin tragedies had been published in the Low Countries, compared to only seven of Greek dramas. The *Nachleben* of the Greeks thus, ironically, begins with their imitator from the time of the Roman Empire. As is the case for the humanists in other European countries, the Roman dramatist plays an equally important role in the reception and reworking of ancient drama as the Greek authors themselves.

Why Seneca? The knowledge of Latin was simply much more widespread than that of Greek and other ancient languages. The Netherlands had high-quality education in Latin (Worp 1907: 244). Furthermore, the name of Seneca was held in high regard because of his philosophical œuvres. For educational

purposes, his works were very useful. There are indications that the tragedies of Seneca (like the comedies of Plautus and Terence) were staged by students in various Dutch cities, from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards (Worp 1892: 48).

Scholars were also keen to work on Senecan tragedy. From 1536, both collected and separate editions of his plays were appearing in print. Half a century later, the first critical edition was published by Franciscus Raphelengius, accompanied by notes by Justus Lipsius (1588). Numerous prominent Dutch humanists—including Scaliger, Heinsius, and Vossius—engaged with the text of these plays. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, new editions quickly followed each other (Worp 1892: 43–46).

It is therefore evident that Seneca also started to function as a model writer for the modern stage. As in England (*The Tragedy of Gorboduc*, 1561, by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville), the first drama experiments were constructed on a Senecan template. Initially, the tragedies were written in Latin and dealt with biblical subjects. The best known plays were authored by Hugo Grotius and Daniel Heinsius. Later, starting with Pieter Cornelisz Hooft (*Achilles and Polyxena*, 1614) and Samuel Coster (*Itys*, 1615), the other poets of the Golden Age—who wrote, not in Latin, but in Dutch—would also be thoroughly influenced by Seneca. Thus, *Hierusalem verwoest* by Joost van den Vondel (*Jerusalem Destroyed*, 1620) clearly echoes *Troades*. Even those who did not read Latin, such as the successful author of spectacular horror dramas, Jan Vos, sought the assistance of a learned humanist to enrich his play *Aran en Titus* (1641) with influences from *Thyestes*.

What modern dramatists looked for in the works of the Roman playwright was a toolbox full of dramatic structures, stylistic techniques, and new topics. Such technical skills provided writers with an alternative to the clumsy dramatic forms and the static allegorical characters that characterize the medieval mystery plays and the rhetoricians' drama. Seneca's plays, in other words, constituted the laboratory that assisted in the invention of modern drama. From him the humanists learnt to divide their plays into five acts. Abstract and moralizing characters that do not engage in real dialogue were replaced by people of flesh and blood. A chorus was introduced, although the choral passages were not necessarily located at the end of an act. And the spectators' desire for spectacular theatrical effects was met through dream scenes, sorcerers, subterranean spirits, and ghosts (Worp 1892: 63). Typical is the following stage direction from Jan Vos' *Medea* (1667): “together with the tree on which the Golden Fleece is hanging, bulls, a dragon, warriors and Jason appear from the ground in smoke and flames” (quoted in Worp 1892: 263).

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the imitation of Seneca gradually decreased. The establishment of the literary society in 1669 symbolized a new direction in Dutch-language drama and theater. Together with that of Seneca's horror tragedies, the impact of pastoral comedy and modern English tragedy gave way to a new model that would come to dominate Western Europe: the classicist tragedy of seventeenth-century France. It is significant that

in the period of more than one hundred years that elapsed between the last seventeenth-century translation (Euripides' *Hippolytus*, 1671) and the first late modern translation (Bilderdijk's *Edipus, koning van Thebe*, an adaptation of *Oedipus the King* from 1779), no more than a single Dutch translation of a Greek tragedy appeared. Even Seneca would have to wait more than 250 years for a new translator.³

The Nineteenth Century

After a century of neglect, Bilderdijk's translations of Sophocles were the harbingers of a new interest in ancient drama. In rhyming verse, the Dutch scholar and poet tried to bring Greek poetry closer to his audience, an audience that he himself did not estimate to be very large. After all, modern theatrical taste was still dictated by French classicism. In the Low Countries, the impact of innovations such as bourgeois drama (which Diderot's *Le Fils naturel* had launched in 1757) was not so great. In the preface to *De dood van Edipus* (*The Death of Oedipus*, after *Oedipus at Colonus*), Bilderdijk underlined that these translations were not intended for the stage, but were only composed for his personal pleasure (1789: x). In fact, he even conceded that if ever he were to write a tragedy, it would be the modern French example that he would follow, not that of the Greeks (1779: 31).

Why, then, did Bilderdijk translate those anachronistic Greeks? His poetical arguments reveal a surprisingly political tone. Dutch drama appeared to be under the threat from "the intrusion of novelties" (1779: 31). French classicism was seen as nothing less than an epidemic from abroad. Furthermore, the structure of French tragedies was related to the authoritarian form of government that characterized the country. That made the presence of a chorus into a structural impossibility in a French play. On the Greek stage, by contrast (just as in many Dutch imitations, e.g., in Vondel), the continuous presence of the chorus was considered by Bilderdijk to be an echo of Athenian democracy. "The People was thus an inextricable character in all of their Tragedies: a character, in whose presence all events should occur, and therefore a character that should continuously occupy the stage" (Bilderdijk 1779: 6–7).

Greek drama had to function as an example, that nevertheless offered very little practical guidance or inspiration. In Bilderdijk's own later historical dramas, such as *Floris V* (1808) and *Kormak* (1808), there are no structural elements from Greek drama (such as the chorus). These plays are much closer to the "detested" French example than to the more contemporary, German model of historical tragedy. A similar path was taken by playwright Samuel Iperusz Wiselius and by the Classicist P.A.S. van Limburg Brouwer (Haak 1977: 16–17). Their interest in ancient drama remained essentially theoretical. Only Wiselius indeed translated excerpts from Euripides and Seneca in order to insert these in his drama *Polydorus* (1813).

As in other Western European countries, interest in Greek drama was the exception rather than the rule. The formal language of tragedy was at odds with

all the major genres of nineteenth-century serious drama: French classical tragedy, romantic tragedy and melodrama. Greek comedy had an even smaller presence in Dutch-language culture. At the time when Bilderdijk wrote the remarks quoted above, only three translations of comedy were available in print. An instructive tool for examining the general attitude towards Greek theater is the bibliography of Dutch translations of foreign dramas published during the nineteenth century, which was compiled in 1907 by theater historian J.A. Worp. Indeed, it lists no fewer than 43 translations from the Greek, which undeniably betrays an increasing interest.⁴ But that figure pales in comparison to the long list of plays translated from the German (526 titles) and from the French (662). Those lists include not only Molière and Racine, or Goethe and Schiller, but especially the authors of the popular melodramas such as Guibert de Pixérécourt and Eugène Labiche, or August von Kotzebue and August Ifflandt (Worp 1907).

It is not surprising, then, that the time was still not ripe for new productions of Greek plays. Goethe himself, not the least grecophile of the nineteenth century, had little confidence in the effect of Sophocles' *Antigone* on the stage of Weimar, where he planned to perform the play in 1809. So much so, that the performance was to be followed by an operetta by Ignaz von Seyfried. A similar decision was taken when *Antigone* was performed in 1837 in Amsterdam. A comprehensive adaptation of the play by Alexander François Sifflé was staged in the Amsterdam *Stadsschouwburg* (municipal theater). Again, the program was complemented by a more contemporary production, namely the "grand Ballet Pantomime" *Aladyn, or the Wonder Lamp*. And one year later Wiselius' adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* suffered the same fate, when it was followed by the ballet *Asmodeus* (Haak 1977: 32–33).

Contemporaries understood very well that the taste of the nineteenth-century metropolis differed profoundly from that of the Athenian polis. One newspaper speaks of a performance that "promises both the friend of classical art and the lover of romantic art, pleasure and satisfaction." But in the same sentence, the author does not hesitate to emphasize that it is "an outstanding ballet as regards the decorations, costumes and dances" (*De Avondbode*, Nov. 14, 1837).

Not only the music, but also the way in which the text of Sophocles was reworked by Sifflé demonstrates the aim to bring Greek tragedy closer to his own time. Unlike the almost simultaneous performances in Potsdam and Berlin under the impetus of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, historical empathy was of little concern in Amsterdam. In Prussia, the artistic directors (the author Ludwig Tieck and the composer Felix Mendelssohn) received the support and advice of the philologist August Böckh. They used an accurate translation, written by Johann Jakob Donner, and remodeled the Potsdam court theater according to contemporary archeological insights about the theater of Dionysus in Athens (Flashar 1991; Geary 2014).

In Amsterdam, by contrast, Sifflé resolutely opted for a melodramatic *Antigone*. The partitioning into episodes and stasima was replaced by acts and scenes. The chorus was eliminated and their lines strongly reworked and placed in the mouth

of two “counsellors,” following the template of the French classicist *confidants and confidantes*. The meaning of ancient Greek religious practices, especially at the funeral (such as the libation), was further emphasized in the dialogues in order to explain them to a modern audience. But a much more drastic change was the introduction of new characters. In particular, Antigone’s spurned lover Lysippus, a pure example of the melodramatic villain, catches the eye. With Sifflé, it is not only Creon’s authoritarian attitude that leads to Antigone’s death. The responsibility lies at least as much with Lysippus, the vengeful head of the guards, who forces his subordinates to reveal the identity of the person they saw burying the corpse of Polyneices.

Just a few years earlier, a previous *Antigone* translator, Petrus Camper, had fiercely opposed modern efforts to romanticize the relationship between Antigone and her cousin Haimon. He saw this as characteristic of “contemporary and especially foreign plays,” because in the text of Sophocles, no evidence for such romance is to be found.⁵ Sifflé, by contrast, emphasizes their affair, and makes Haimon confess to Antigone that he plans to take his own life if she were to die. Antigone is thereby given the opportunity to vent a particularly sentimental sort of patriotism. She encourages her lover to take a stance that is more masculine and devoted to the nation: “Man belongs to the State and may only perish for her” (Sifflé 1836: 31).

Another melodramatic element is the theatrical spectacle and abrupt plot twist, when Creon’s rejection of the warning by Tiresias is immediately followed by thunder and lightning. He promptly forgives Antigone and Haimon, but to no avail. At the very end, the Messenger Euphorbus has to report the bloody conclusion to the survivors. Antigone has hanged herself, Haimon has slain Lysippus, and wanted to stab his father to death, but missed and, out of remorse, threw himself on his own sword. He dies, “swimming in his own blood,” as Sifflé does not fail to mention (1836: 82).

From the Turn of the Century to World War II

In Western Europe, the end of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a new and intense interest in Greek drama. Translations now appear in rapid succession. Between the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1871) and the beginning of World War I (1914), no fewer than 49 Dutch translations were published, of which the majority (nearly 80%) were tragedies. A new phenomenon was the appearance of professional translators, who rendered a significant part of the œuvre of ancient dramatists into Dutch. Examples include the Classicist Henricus van Herwerden’s efforts for Sophocles (three translations) and for the complete *Oresteia* of Aeschylus; or Shakespeare translator L.A.J. Burgersdijk, who translated almost all the tragedies of Sophocles and half those of Aeschylus. The professors Willem Hecker and Jan van Leeuwen, too, each published several translations of Greek tragedy.

A second change concerns the heightened sensitivity to historical accuracy. Van Leeuwen was one of the first to distinguish between translations faithful to the original text and freer, modernizing adaptations. Both had a right to exist, though he preferred the first kind. In his translation of *Ajax* he wanted to retain the Greek meter as much as possible, with the aim of letting something of the play's original impact "reverberate" with the modern reader. Remarkably, the imagery that Van Leeuwen employed to help explain this conversion was supplied by the latest technological advances. The reverberation would probably sound "like a weakened, thinned buzz of a telephone" (Van Leeuwen 1882: 134).

Such reflections are not remarkable in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. This was in stark contrast to the situation of a century before. In 1804, the literal and archaic translations of Sophocles into German by Friedrich Hölderlin were a solitary phenomenon, leading to bewilderment and ridicule. Now, however, several translations took the very strangeness of the Greek text as their starting point. A striking example is the work of the French poet Leconte de Lisle, who translated practically the entire tragic corpus into French between 1860 and 1880. He no longer used the Latin transcriptions of Greek names (*Aides* remains *Aides*, and is not translated by *Pluton* as used to be the case). Typical Greek terms, such as *paian*, *daimon* and *eros* were also left untranslated. According to Humbert-Mougin, it was clearly the intention of the translator for the reader to feel displaced by "the intrusion of words equally foreign in their sound and in their spelling" (2003: 34).

The strangeness of the Greek text no longer acted as a deterrent, but now evoked fascination, at least for poets and readers. It was only in 1899 that Leconte de Lisle's version of the *Oresteia* would be successfully staged in France, since the first performance of 1873 was a total flop (Humbert-Mougin 2003: 14). In the Netherlands and Flanders, too, the poets were the first to be fascinated by tragedy. Among the Dutch *Tachtigers* (a generation of estheticist poets gaining prominence during the 1880s), especially Albert Verwey and Willem Kloos aimed at using the influence of the Classics in order to escape the moralistic influence of the so-called "pastor poetry" (Van den Berg and Couttenier 2009: 576). Within that project, tragedy played a significant role. Willem Kloos translated the *Antigone* of Sophocles in 1898, and stated that in antiquity "something is to be found for the evolving poet, which he would elsewhere look for in vain" (quoted in Koster 1932: 157). Three years later, *Antigone* was the subject of an essay in *De Nieuwe Gids* (the movement's chief periodical) by the Dante translator, Hendricus Johannes (Hein) Boeken, who gave an interpretation strongly influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. According to Boeken, not only the intoxication of wine falls under the protection of Dionysus, but also the "intoxicated" moral stubbornness of Antigone. Hers is a passion "that pleases the god, that leads to acceptance of the great struggle, the struggle with unworthy coercion and unbounded violence. And of that passion the tragedy paints the picture, the tragedy that was the song and rite by which Dionysus was worshiped"

(Boeken 1901: 267). This is probably the first occasion on which a ritualistic interpretation of Greek drama was introduced to the Dutch-speaking world.

What exactly is it that the “decadent” poet of the *fin de siècle* found in Greek tragedy, “which he would elsewhere look for in vain”? Undoubtedly not merely something Greek, but also something of himself. Often his reading experience was sentimentally informed. With an almost audible sigh, Kloos writes in 1886: “If Sophocles’ *Antigone* complains while dying that the fame she was promised sounds like scorn to her ears, then the nineteenth-century reader shivers in his chair, so intense is the mood” (1887: 316). The composer Alphons Diepenbrock, a friend of Kloos, would later use the same sentimental sensitivity when he composed the musical scores to accompany performances of Aristophanes’ *Birds* (1918) and Sophocles’ *Electra* (1920).

Besides the sentimental, there was also undeniably (as elsewhere in Europe) an archaizing trend that became more and more manifest. In Flanders, a number of seminary students—among whom the poet Albrecht Rodenbach, who died at an early age—made a noteworthy translation of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* under the guidance of priest-teacher Hugo Verriest. Rodenbach’s part of the translation, which was published after his death, aimed to transpose the elliptical Greek constructions almost literally into Dutch. The results did not always sound very accessible to modern ears.⁶ A further point of note is that Rodenbach (influenced by Verriest?) was the first Dutch-speaking author in whose writings a trace of ritualism manifests itself. When the students are preparing to recite the translated play during class, he announces that the verses should be sung “almost in the tone of the preface,” meaning the introduction to the eucharistic prayer during Holy Mass (Vanlandschoot 2002: 371).

Greek tragedy could therefore serve as a model for a new and sacred kind of theater, which was to be deployed as a weapon against the commercial excesses of melodrama and cheap comedy. Although in Flemish and Dutch theater history, relatively few performances can be discovered (barely ten during the period between 1871 and 1914), those few initiatives may easily be related to similar international developments. And that trend will only continue after World War I. Throughout Europe, *anticomanie* appeared to be the perfect antidote to the dominant fashion in performing arts that was considered vulgar. From 1881 to 1917, Jean Mouret-Sully triumphed as Oedipus on the stage of the Comédie Française. (In the Roman theater of Orange, the show would continue to attract new audiences up to 1924.) Also *Antigone* (1893) and the *Orestie* (1899) succeeded in captivating Parisian audiences. With the Moscow Art Theater, Konstantin Stanislavski produced *Antigone* in the same year in which he also directed Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* (1899). And Max Reinhardt overwhelmed the bourgeois audiences for whom he otherwise presented refined productions of Shakespeare and Richard Strauss, with the “beastly” horror and crowd scenes of his *Oedipus Rex* (1910), later followed by an impressive *Oresteia* (1911).⁷

In the Netherlands, however, the first experiments with staging Greek drama took place on the margins rather than in the center of the established theater. These productions demonstrate a conspicuously historicizing tendency. At the Amsterdam *gymnasium*, a group of students presented *Antigone* in ancient Greek, in a production directed by teacher and dramatist, M.B. Mendes da Costa (1885). Six years later he directed Utrecht students in *Oedipus the King*, this time in the relatively modern (yet not metrical and rhymed) translation by Henricus van Herwerden. The style of that production may be labeled contemporary. Although it was emphatically historical (drawing on the advice of archeologists for the set design), Mendes da Costa was also an avid theatergoer, and had carefully watched the performances of the Meiningen Court Theater while the company was touring the Netherlands. Just like the Meiningen, he strove to make the scenic picture more dynamic, by emphasizing ensemble acting and by arranging the components of the set design into an asymmetrical whole of diverse heights (Haak 1977: 54–58).

The theatergoing audience and the critics, too, slowly started to consider Greek tragedy more and more as an authentic product for the contemporary stage, albeit still to be domesticated. Indeed, horrifying events such as Oedipus' patricide and his incestuous marriage with Jocasta could be difficult to reconcile with bourgeois taste—but did the same not apply equally to the abnormal scenes and pathological figures of naturalistic drama? The remarkable fact that this comparison *could* be made by a reviewer of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* demonstrates that the integration of tragedy had become a fact.⁸

Student productions opened the door to professional performances. The *Nederlandsch Toneel* gave Mendes da Costa the opportunity to redo *Koning Oidipous* (1896) and *Antigone* (1897), but this time with a cast of professional performers, including the charismatic star actor Louis Bouwmeester. After the eruptive passions and the melodramatic play of Mounet-Sully in *Œdipe roi* (also to be witnessed in Amsterdam in 1892), however, Mendes da Costa had to be wary of such seasoned players. For him, theatrical effects, such as when Mounet-Sully had violently thrown the shepherd to the ground in order to force a confession from him (which had also happened in the German and English productions designed by Reinhardt), were totally out of the question. But Bouwmeester's performance was built on such effects. The concluding scene of the production clearly showed that the star actor was not to be denied his theatrical effects, and illustrated that the era of the director's theater had not yet arrived. Bouwmeester did not want his Oedipus simply to disappear from the stage at the end of the play, as Mendes da Costa had suggested. Instead, he climbed a rock which was part of the set and remained there until the curtain fell, wailing and gesticulating during the final song of the chorus (Haak 1977: 68). In *De Gids*, J.N. Hall rightly observed that Greek tragedy was thereby given “the allures and tone of a modern melodrama,” and that “it grabs hold of, and shakes, and finally entrances a not too demanding audience” (Hall 1896: 597).

Although tragedy had certainly become more accepted by the end of the nineteenth century, and served as a channel to express a collective admiration for ancient Greek culture, that did not mean that the ancient genre could be smoothly adapted to the expectations of a contemporary audience. For example, what to do with the chorus? Both director and critics were dissatisfied with the quality of the music composed by J.C.M. van Riemsdijk for the Amsterdam productions. It was commonly accepted that the stasima could not possibly be removed from a performance without affecting the essence of the play. (Still, that had been done rather frequently, for instance, in the successful adaptation of three Sophoclean tragedies by Adolf Wilbrandt for a Meiningen production which had remained in the repertoire of the Vienna Burgtheater from 1866 to 1899.) The general feeling held that the choral songs had to be modified or shortened for a modern production. After five performances, the music of the Amsterdam *Oedipus* production was therefore omitted.

Melodramatic and spectacular effects were characteristic of that program of modernization. The influence of Max Reinhardt's productions in Berlin's Zirkus Schumann, which could also be witnessed in the rest of Europe (including London's Theatre Royal at Covent Garden), can hardly be overstated. Some reviews were devastating—"It was a circus performance with a little art here and there," one reviewer wrote after the Amsterdam performances (1911)—still, Reinhardt paved the way for looking at tragedy as a vehicle for monumental emotions and spectacular theatrical displays with numerous crowd scenes. The Dutch actor and director Willem Royaards had played the role of Teiresias in a production by Reinhardt of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Oedipus und die Sphinx* (1906). For his own open-air production of *Koning Oidipous* in Park Sonsbeek in Arnhem, he adopted Hofmannsthal's reworked version of the play and Reinhardt's production design. From the abstract and monumental decor, the majestic costumes and the crowd scenes spoke to the ambition to stylize the tragic figures, rather than bring them back to the dimensions of a realistic bourgeois drama.

The result of six decades of revaluation of Greek tragedy, on the eve of World War II, shows tension and conflict. In any case, it was no longer just grecophiles who took an interest in Greek tragedy. In their often strange-sounding language and alien dramatic forms, the Greek plays offered an alternative to the commercial and strongly convention-bound theater of the nineteenth century. Translators were increasingly taking the trouble to let some elements of that strangeness shine through in their adaptations, although the solemn language (full of references to long-forgotten gods and customs) and the presence of the chorus remained problematic. The performance practice in this period had to make do with drastic truncations, deletions, and with explicit references to ancient Greek culture. Some observers emphasized the conflictual aspects of adaptation. The Frankfurt professor of *Sprechkunde* (rhetoric), Friedrichkarl Roedemeyer, discusses the current feasibility of choral performances at length in his book, *Vom Wesen des Sprech-Chores* (The Essence of the Reciting Choir, 1926). He sees a successful future for

contemporary choral drama, written by contemporary authors, but cannot foresee artistic success for the ancient Greek chorus song: "There is no solution to the performance of ancient dramas regarding the chorus" (Roedemeyer 1926: 35). Such sweeping statements conceal that the choice between modernizing or archaizing remained essentially undecided at the beginning of the twentieth century. While discussing his Amsterdam production of *Medea* (Euripides) of 1936, director August Defresne strikingly articulated this ambiguity: "It is therefore the drama of two *Übermenschen*, but also that of the maid and the milkman" (Haak 1977: 115).

In addition to the discussion about authenticity versus modernization, new performances also projected quite new concerns on the ancient canvas of Greek tragedy. For the first time, in the wake of Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy and that of the Cambridge Ritualists (Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray), the ritual dimension of ancient drama was taken seriously. In 1939, Sophocles' *Ajax* was staged by a group of young actors. Stage designer Charles Roelofsz indicated that his task was to design "the space for a religious act," because it is after all "a religious play, a sacrificial act." (Haak 1977: 127) The new ritualism was not just a philological or an archeological concern. That ancient theater had a strongly religious and ceremonial dimension appeared to be a convincing reason for attempting to bring such ritualistic forms back to life in the present.

The Postwar Period

According to the theatrography which was prepared for this contribution, approximately 35 professional productions of Greek drama were made in the Low Countries during the period of roughly one and a half centuries between 1800 and 1945. During just the next three decades, that figure almost doubles. The actual numbers will probably be somewhat higher for each period, because it is always difficult to compose an exhaustive theatrography, but the magnitude of the difference is in itself significant. The same phenomenon is visible in the translations. Between 1945 and 1965, no fewer than 43 Dutch translations of Greek plays were published. This trend continues, up to the present day. If, during the 1950s, there were more than ten productions for the first time, and over 30 during the 1960s, then that figure rose to more than 50 during the 1980s and even to more than 100 during the 1990s.

The main causes for this greatly increased popularity have already been discussed above. The unconventional nature of the ancient Greek plays should counterbalance a theater system that was suffering from lack of innovation and sclerosis. Their ritual origin continued to fascinate, and started to function as the projection surface for the ritualistic and primitivist fantasies of contemporary consciousness. But there were also new elements being introduced after 1945, such as the reactivation of the political content of the tragedies and comedies.

To detect historical fault lines in the theater of the recent past is a risky venture. Nonetheless, a new trend can be discerned around the mid-1970s. The monumentality of the 1950s and 1960s gives way to radical updates of Greek tragedy. This often involves a thorough transformation of the ancient text. For example, a symbolic production of the new staging practice is Peter Stein's *Antikenprojekt* from 1971. I will therefore make a clear distinction between the productions from the period 1945–1970, which I discuss in this section, and the later, so-called "post-dramatic" productions, which will be the subject of the next (and concluding) part.

I will focus on two distinct tendencies of the period after World War II: the increasing stylization and abstraction of the *mise en scène*, which was already announced in the previous decades, and the dramaturgical articulation of political aspects of the plays. For each of these tendencies, I would also like to highlight the solutions that these artists have found to the problem of the chorus.

In terms of translation, scenography, costumes and acting style, the productions of the 1950s and 1960s were more simple and stylized. The "Greek" gowns and pillars of earlier times were increasingly being replaced by simple attire and abstract decors. It was not only the modernist legacy of the first half of the twentieth century that had so drastically affected the theatrical imagination. Of course, this legacy existed: apart from Reinhardt, think of director-designers from the prewar period such as Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Leopold Jessner, and Adolphe Appia. But in 1951, the program of theatrical stylization was first and foremost associated with the innovative productions by Wieland Wagner in Bayreuth. These liberated the work of his grandfather Richard of all external mythological ballast, starting with his *Parsifal*. The *Electra* of Sophocles directed by Ton Lutz in 1954 with the Nederlandse Comedie; the *Antigone* of the Haagse Comedie (by Max Croiset, 1959), the *Medea* of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg in Antwerp (Jo Dua, 1960); the *Koning Oidipous* of the Rotterdam Toneel (Ton Lutz, 1961); *De Perzen* by the Nieuwe Komedie on the large stage of Theatre Carré in Amsterdam (Erik Vos, 1963); the *Koning Oedipus* of the Nederlands Theater Gent (Frans Roggen, 1966)—in all these productions a conspicuous choice was made, both formally and thematically, in favor of simplification and monumentality. It is as if the theater artists of this period wanted to show the tragic myth in its philosophical nudity, stripped of everything external.

The translations of choice were also contemporary versions. These were readily available. *Antigone*, for instance, was translated four times between 1945 and 1970 (by P. Brommer, Frans Cluytens, Emiel De Waele, and Pé Hawinkels). When a director chose to work with an older translation, it created tension. Ton Lutz was invited in 1954 to direct a production based on the translation by P.C. Boutens (and the accompanying music by Alphons Diepenbrock), but reacted: "It's a typical translation of the *Tachtigers*. Beautiful, certainly, but: *l'art pour l'art*. That was not and is not my attitude towards Sophocles, I want *l'art pour tout le monde*" (quoted in Haak 1977: 157).

Confronted with the director's ambition to accentuate the universal dimension of ancient Greek theater, the presence of the chorus—concluding every act with a verbally rich speech full of mythological references—turned into a disturbing factor. Various solutions were examined. Some were quite simple: in Lutz' first production, the chorus was reduced to four members (*Medea*, 1956), then Croiset brought it down further to three (*Antigone*, 1959), and then Lutz again reduced it to two (*Oedipus the King*, 1961). Frequently, artists and critics suggested that the role of the chorus (using the famous phrase of August Wilhelm Schlegel) was that of an “ideal spectator.” According to Haak, that was no accident. Spatially, these new productions were more restricted than before. Reinhardt, for example, had opted for large circular stages resembling the ancient Greek *orchestra*. (This was also the case in Walter Tillemans' student production of *Lysistrata* of 1971.) On the rather restricted, box-shaped stage of the regular *théâtre à l'italienne*, there was simply no place for a large chorus where they could take a clearly secluded and contemplative place apart from the action (Haak 1977: 212–213).

Besides the gradual elimination of the chorus, there was another solution: to transform it. Again, the model for this kind of approach came from abroad. Johan de Meester had witnessed a performance of *Les Perses* by the Groupe de Théâtre Antique in 1949. The French amateur group, consisting mainly of students, was founded at the Sorbonne in 1936 as the successor to Les Théophiliens, a project of medievalist Gustave Cohen that aimed to bring medieval drama back to life. The Groupe de Théâtre Antique wanted to do the same for Greek drama (Patron 1997: 48). In order to avoid the old pitfall of classicizing tragedy, it helped that the members of the French company were young and unburdened by a previous theatrical career. Moreover, the initiators were influenced by theater innovator Jacques Copeau (one of the founding members of the company was Roland Barthes). Their solutions were adopted by Johan de Meester for his production of *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1951), and were directly inspired by the ancient performance tradition: playing on a circular stage (*orchestra*), the use of masks, and making the chorus members dance, albeit within the context of a contemporary choreography (Haak 1977: 140). The same solution was used by Richard Flink in 1959 for the first Dutch production of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which impressed critic Ben Stroman:

Nine women, three groups of three, constituted the chorus and they moved in certain choreographic figures on the stage. Never disrupting their unity, they remained functionally linked to the dramatic action. Not a mere embellishment besides the episodes, but directly connected to them, sharing in the action. (quoted in Haak 1977: 192)

A choreographic approach to the chorus thus helped to integrate the ancient structures within a contemporary artistic whole. This is illustrated, too, by the profound impression left by the Greek company Piraikon Theatron (led by Dimitrios Rondiris) with their performances of Sophocles' *Electra* (in Amsterdam

and Brussels, 1961), Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Amsterdam, 1963) and Euripides' *Medea* (Antwerp, 1965). As Rondiris put it himself, he had, surprisingly, sought inspiration in Greek Orthodox liturgy. That may make little sense from a historical point of view, but it fits perfectly with the sacred and ritualistic view of tragedy that had come into vogue during the last decades: "in the Byzantine hymns and Greek folk dances and lamentations, we found the essential element that is appropriate to the strict, architectural, ritual form of Greek tragedy" (quoted in Frenkel Frank 1961).

It is a successful approach. For critic Dimitri Frenkel Frank, the rhythmically drilled tragedy of Piraikon Theatron, although it was performed in modern Greek, made the same impact as a modern musical: "Suddenly, the ancient Greeks – in a language no one understands – are playing to the same sold-out houses as *West Side Story*" (Frenkel Frank, 1961). The guest productions from Rondiris thus constituted the highest stage of the process of estheticization and monumentalization that Greek drama was going through during the first half of the twentieth century. But this trend was far from the only one that would determine the face of tragedy after 1945. The first clearly politicized tragedy performance was probably the famous staging of Jean Anouilh's adaptation of *Antigone*, directed by André Barsacq during the last months of the German Occupation of Paris (February 1944). Although there are no explicit references to the political situation, it was obvious to each and every spectator that Antigone's resistance against the tyrannical Creon was but a thinly veiled allusion to the resistance against the Nazi aggression in Europe. The same connection was made by the Amsterdam Toneelgezelschap when it staged *Antigone* (now in the translation and musical adaptation of Bertus van Lier) on Liberation Day (5 May) of 1952. Moreover, Anouilh's adaptation was often performed during this period, not only in the mainstream theater circuit (e.g., by the Antwerp KNS in 1953), but also within the circuit of the "pocket theaters" such as the Nederlands Kamertoneel and Toneelstudio '50.

The context of World War II turned *Antigone* into a highly topical play. But the translators and adaptors of the 1960s and 1970s would go much further. Some made their agenda explicit by including the current year in the title. With the drama students of Studio Herman Teirlinck, Bert Verminnen and Alfons Goris created an adaptation of Sophocles entitled *Ajax '68*. The following year, in the USA, Richard Schechner and the Performance Group made a big impression with *Dionysus in '69* (based on the *Bacchae* of Euripides),⁹ while Erik Vos and Inez van Dullemen adapted the same text in their *Bachanten '71*.

All these productions gave full rein to ritualism, albeit following the model of physical theater and happenings. Instead of choreography and stylization it was now rather about screaming, crawling and a deliberately distorted acting style. These same characteristics were to be found in Hugo Claus' *Thyestes* (1966), adapted from the eponymous play by Seneca. The young writer also directed the production himself, and tried to disrupt the current realistic acting style with dissonant declamation and gesticulation. The aim of his twisted modernization of Seneca's verses full of bile and blood was to blast the spectator out of his comfortable seat.

During interviews, Claus referred continuously (like many other young artists of that time) to the French innovator Antonin Artaud, in order to legitimize his approach. The name of Artaud functioned for Claus and his collaborators as a kind of identity marker, with which he wanted to appeal to an original and primitive form of ritual theater, similar to what Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and the Living Theatre were attempting around that time. Nevertheless, in Claus' approach, the vocal aspect was crucial (understanding language as "incantation"), rather than the fully physical language of the theater that Artaud had asked for. He explicitly used the terms "oratorio" and "declamation," and tried to be even more bloodthirsty than Seneca himself.¹⁰

Just as Reinhardt had set the tone for the performance of tragedy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Groupe de Théâtre Antique and the Piraikon Theatron (together with Wieland Wagner) had introduced a new model just after World War II, so the leading example for the political interpretation of tragedy again came from abroad. It was not *Dionysus in '69* (which was never performed in Europe), but the production of *Antigone*, strongly influenced by Bertolt Brecht, that the Living Theatre brought to Brussels in 1967. The American-European company presented a stripped-down, but no less impressive, version of *Antigone*. Unsupported by music or scenography, and only using their voices, twenty young performers from the Living Theatre performed a brutal and horrifying tragedy, in which Julian Beck's Creon not merely tried to intimidate his own people, but actually tortured and emasculated them. Judith Malina played an Antigone who was judged reminiscent of a Vietnamese woman by some critics, and who spoke her monologues first in a realistic fashion in English, but immediately afterwards (in a much flatter tone) in French. All of her lines, moreover, were announced, through a Brechtian device, using the third person singular: "Antigone says." After the audience had weathered this storm, not everyone was convinced. Some saw the production as an impressive machine, others spoke of it as "a hysterical Bacchus dance, a kind of mating ritual" (L.P. 1967).

That the tone and intensity of the Living Theatre was catching on, was evident from the remarkable student production of Aristophanes' sex comedy *Lysistrata* in 1971, directed by Walter Tillemans, (Figure 14.3). Just as the (exclusively male) actors of Attic Old Comedy were equipped with a leather phallus, which, depending on the content of the scene, could be flaccid or erect, Tillemans had almost all male characters wear an erect penis made from leather. The female characters, however, could choose one of the dresses crocheted in silk by the Antwerp fashion designer Ann Salens. Salens, who was known for her daring see-through dresses and her flamboyant, happening-like fashion shows, had colorfully marked the place of the breasts and the pubic area on some of her dresses. This was the perfect uniform, Tillemans must have thought, for a sex fighter such as Lysistrata. Not only the Peloponnesian Wars, but also the still raging war in Vietnam was targeted by this sexual language of protest. It was signaled even more clearly by the director, when peace signs and slogans such as "Make love not war" were brought on stage by the actors during the prologue.



Figure 14.3 *Lysistrata*, directed by Walter Tillemans, 1971. Female cast in silk crocheted dresses designed by Ann Salens.

Postdramatic Theater

The fact that Sophocles and Aristophanes could be seamlessly connected to present political concerns shows that Greek drama, from 1968 onwards, had definitively become an accepted presence on the European (and American) stage. Concerning the Dutch-speaking countries, the figures for translations and productions can only be called phenomenal. No fewer than 109 translations of ancient Greek plays were published between 1970 and 2000—a huge number for such a relatively small language.¹¹ On the stage, at least 197 (professional) theater productions were realized, mainly of tragedies by Euripides (78) and Sophocles (75). Remarkably, only 5% of the productions were comedies.

Internationally, tragedy was at the center of theatrical interest. It was no longer the vehicle for a bloodless and estheticized classicism, as might have been the case around the middle of the twentieth century, but now served as a canvas for the most daring experiments. Besides the Performance Group and the Living Theatre, one immediately thinks of the profound cinematic and theatrical retelling of *Medea* by Robert Wilson (*Deafman's Glance*, 1971) or the *Antikenprojekt* of Peter Stein (1974). They opened the way for a radical re-imaging of the tragic hero and his (or her) world. In the 1980s and 1990s, crucial texts and productions followed,

such as Heiner Müller's *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* (1982), Peter Sellars' *Ajax* (1987), Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* (1993) or Jan Ritsema's *Philoctetes-Variaties* (1994).

Tragedy had gained a new voice. This is the "postdramatic" theater, using the expression of Hans-Thies Lehmann, because it has abandoned most, if not all, dramatic conventions: dialogue, suspense, climax, and denouement, clearly delineated characters and a definite location in time and space. In its place now come dream scenes, fragmented speech, visual dramaturgy, "concrete theater," soundscapes, adaptations of non-dramatic texts (essays, novels, diaries), performance art (the "irruption of the real"), simultaneity and musically structured productions (Lehmann 2006).

Also in the Low Countries, tragic writing is deconstructed as the basis for new experiments in adaptation. Theater writer and director Jan Decorte fuses Euripides' *Medea* and *Bacchae* into one work, which he entitles *Vrouwen* (Women, 1977). In the same year it was directed by Jaak van de Velde on the stage of the Ghent Arena Teater. Other leading directors of the "Flemish Wave"—a nickname from the 1980s for a generation of Flemish innovators in theater and dance—show a particular interest in tragedy. Ivo Van Hove first reworked Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* into *Als in de oorlog* (As If in War, 1982), that was performed in the vast Montevideo barrack in the port of Antwerp, and then two other plays in the double-bill *Ajax/Antigone* (Zuidelijk Toneel, 1991). He staged the tragedies one after the other, in a setting and design clearly transposed into the present. Odysseus was wearing an American baseball cap, and Athena was dressed in a skintight leather outfit, eating chips and drinking cola, and immersing herself in gossip about the royal family. The chorus consisted of a uniformly gray group of government officials, all having identical suits, hairstyles and glasses. Van Hove clearly wanted to modernize by demythologizing: when the gods and heroes have tumbled from their pedestals, they turn out to be figures that have more to say about the present (American consumerism and militarism) than about ancient Greece (Coolen 1991).

Jan Fabre's *Prometheus Landschaft* (1988), a performance which he created in Berlin, demonstrated on multiple levels how postdramatic directors deconstruct tragedy in order to build their own story from its parts. Fabre first reduced the text of 1100 verses to about 140, in which he, however, managed to preserve the essence of the mythic narrative. These excerpts were sometimes distributed among different performers, then again one player had to incarnate several characters simultaneously. The actors' shorts, just like the props and the whole decor, had been colored blue with ballpoint pens, thus immersing the tragedy completely in Fabre's "bic-art" universe (named after a well-known French producer of pens, called Bic). The production created "an intriguing, tranquil Prometheus landscape, in which the actors occupy their place as living statues" (De Coster 1988).

To the same degree that Fabre's approach may seem enigmatic and even hermetic, Jan Ritsema may be said to be overly obvious in his *Philoctetes-Variaties*,

played by Ron Vawter, Dirk Roofthooft, and Viviane De Muynck (1994). The text came from three sources: a French adaptation of *Philoctetes* by André Gide was combined, untranslated, with an American one (by John Jeshurun), and a German one (Heiner Müller). The actor Ron Vawter, who was suffering from AIDS during the performance, and would succumb to his illness shortly after the premiere, incarnated the paradoxical figure of Philoctetes. The old warrior, cast out because of his reeking wound, held the key to the definitive victory of the Greeks at Troy, because he was in possession of the bow and arrows of Heracles. With every cough, the audience wondered if Vawter was playing the sick warrior, or if it was his illness playing up. "Where does the show end and where does the reality of Vawter's body begin?" (Laermans, 1994).

Not only for Van Hove, Fabre, Ritsema and Vawter, tragedy was a rich vein full of figures and fragments that stimulated the imagination. They, just like artists such as Peter Stein and Peter Sellars in other countries, saw tragedy as a tattered but beautiful fabric which they could and should use to talk about the present. And that ambition drove an entire generation of artists: think of Johan Simons' *De Perzen* (1994) and *Bacchanten* (2002), or the *Oresteia* of Franz Marijnen (1996), or *Aars! Anatomische studie van de Oresteia* (Arse! Anatomical Study of the Oresteia) by Peter Verhelst and Luk Perceval (2000). Modern writers and directors have time and again used the Greeks, through a 500-year-old struggle over their legacy, in order to solve the theatrical problems of their own time.¹²

Notes

- 1 The full bibliography and theatrography may be found on the following website: <http://dighum.uantwerpen.be/grieksdrama>.
- 2 For Flanders, data on theatrical productions from the period between 1966 and 1998 were retrieved from the *Vlaams Theaterjaarboek* (Flemish Theatre Yearbook). For the Netherlands, I used the *TIN Productiedatabase* which is maintained by the Dutch Theatre Institute, available at: <http://wiki.theaterencyclopedia.nl>.
- 3 The last translation of Seneca to be published during the seventeenth century is Jacob Kemp's *Medea, off wraeck van verlaete min* (Medea, or the revenge of love betrayed, 1665). Only in 1918 does a new translation of *Phaedra* by J. van Wageningen appear.
- 4 Using contemporary bibliographies and library catalogs, I arrived at a slightly higher number, namely, 53 translations. See the theaterography available at: <http://dighum.uantwerpen.be/grieksdrama>.
- 5 According to Camper (1834: v):

I do not see why, in an age when women, just like cattle, were extradited to the man who asked them in marriage, if he was backed by the authority of a father or guardian, ANTIGONE would have been obliged to feel a sentimental love for her cousin HEMON, for which by the way the so completely unhappy life of the King's Daughter must have left her neither time nor inclination. HEMON, raised in prosperity and idleness, may love her

passionately, yes, if one wills, even adore her, this is no reason why that glowing love has to be reciprocated with equal passion, such as it is, in the contemporary and especially the foreign plays, described ad nauseam.

- 6 For example: “Verwaarlozen immers Vaders woorden, zwaar is ’t” (“Because neglecting Father’s words, heavy is it”). See Rodenbach (1897: 100).
- 7 A comprehensive theatrography of French productions of Greek tragedy between 1873 and 1922 can be found in Humbert-Mougin (2003: 267–272). For the tragedy productions of Max Reinhardt, see Flashar (1991: 126–130) and Styan (1982: 78–86).
- 8 According to Haak (1977: 57):

The naturalistic drama repulses because of its cruelty and somber tone; but is classical tragedy, which captivates us because of its imperishable beauty, perhaps friendly and reassuring? Nothing of the kind! Incest, patricide, suicide! The naturalists may have to ... descend into the pools of debauchery ...when they wish to emerge with something worse than Sophocles.

- 9 See Chapter 21 for a discussion of *Dionysus in '69*.
- 10 See, for instance: “Het zwaard dwarste het kind, / en zijn gutsend bloed doofde het vuur van het altaar” (“The sword went through the child / and its gushing blood extinguished the fire of the altar,” Claus 1966: 37).
- 11 For a similarly sized language such as Danish, for example, no more than 44 translations were published during that period.
- 12 All translations in this chapter are by the author.

Guide to Further Reading

For the full bibliography and theatrography, see the following website: See <http://dighum.uantwerpen.be/grieksdrama>

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