

## *Virginia Woolf and Performances of Ancient Greek Drama (1900-38)*

Virginia Woolf's engagement with Greek drama has now received considerable attention<sup>1</sup>, but there has been no inventory of the plays she is known to have seen in performance. The present listing, supplemented with some information on the context, is an attempt to provide such a point of reference<sup>2</sup>. Woolf kept no systematic diary until 1915, and so letters no longer surviving from both before and after that date could have included references to plays she had seen<sup>3</sup>.

**1900: 17 November<sup>4</sup>. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*** (New Theatre, Cambridge, 16-17 and 19-21 Nov.; P2)<sup>5</sup>, the eighth of the Cambridge

<sup>1</sup> Prins 2017, for example, has an extensive bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> The plays identified have entries in the Oxford *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama* (APGRD) ([www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk](http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk)), with varying amounts of detail. An inventory at Putzel 2012, is helpful, but summary and incomplete.

<sup>3</sup> Thus she mentions, and quotes from, Sophocles' *Antigone* in her novels *The Voyage Out* (1915), p. 44, and later in *The Years* (1937), p. 393, and also in her tract *Three Guineas* (1938), pp. 162, 204, and 213-214, and would have had several opportunities to see this popular work performed, but there is no evidence of her having done so, including, as her diary shows (*Diary 5*, pp. 206-208), when it was the triennial Greek play at Cambridge in 1939 (4-11 Mar.).

<sup>4</sup> Since she seems to have been in Cambridge the next day, she may have attended either the matinee or evening performance on this Saturday.

<sup>5</sup> The sequence marked «P» identifies anonymously authored reports in the press. See the *Bibliography*.

Greek plays produced at the university since 1882, and the third of seven in a triennial sequence beginning in 1894 (Easterling 1999, p. 47). The date is known because Woolf's elder brother, Julian Thoby (1880-1906), then a second-year undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, gave her a book dated Sunday 18 November inscribed «day after the performance of the "Agamemnon" of Aeschylus» (Fowler 1999, p. 229 n. 9). Thoby and his friend, and contemporary student in the Classical Tripos, Leonard Woolf (1880-1969), Virginia's future husband, had silent parts in the play as slaves, along with the young A.A. Milne (1882-1956), later the author of the children's classic *Winnie-the-Pooh*, who was «a silent Greek maiden» (Milne 1939, p. 131)<sup>6</sup>. Thoby's participation may at least in part explain his sister's presence. In an earlier version of her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, known as *Melymbrosia* she had someone refer (p. 51) to «the Agamemnon at Cambridge the other day»<sup>7</sup>.

**1903: 28 November. Aristophanes, *Birds*** (New Theatre, Cambridge, 24-28 Nov. 1903; Marshall 2016, pp. 269-279), was the next triennial play. Woolf attended a Saturday matinee scheduled «for the benefit of those who wish to return to London afterwards» (P3). She went up from her home in Kensington with «Susan and Mr Lushington» (*Letters* 1, p. 107), the jurist Vernon Lushington K.C. (1832-1912), a neighbour and friend of her family, and Susan (1870-1953), his daughter (Taylor 2020, pp. 303-305), and returned that evening (*Letters* 1, pp. 109-110). The Lushingtons were also neighbours in 17 Kensington Square of Sir Hubert Parry (1848-1918), the Director of the Royal College of Music, who had composed the music for the 1900 production, had in 1903 revised the

<sup>6</sup> Dr Amanda Wrigley kindly provided a copy from the archives of the APGRD of the programme showing the names. Thoby Stephen's (and Virginia's) first cousin, the brilliant but troubled poet James Kenneth Stephen (1859-1892; Newman 2008), had played the title role in Sophocles' *Ajax* in the inaugural Greek play at Cambridge in 1882 (St. Andrew's Hall, 29 Nov.-2 Dec.; Easterling 1999, pp. 31-32; P1).

<sup>7</sup> On Woolf's engagement with the *Agamemnon* see Prins 2017, pp. 35-56.

music composed for the first Cambridge production of *Birds* in 1883<sup>8</sup>.

While in Cambridge she met her younger brother Adrian Leslie (1883-1948) (*Letters* 1, p. 109), then a second-year undergraduate, who is on record as having developed a passion for the actor who took the role of Basileia in the *Birds*<sup>9</sup>. The play may also have left its mark on his sister who some six months later had a major breakdown during which, as she recalled, she lay in bed «thinking that the birds were singing Greek choruses» (*Moments of Being*, p. 184). It is unclear whether she thought that the birds were making articulate sounds or that they were producing the avian equivalents Aristophanes occasionally gives them<sup>10</sup>. She herself drew no overt connection between her illusion and the play seen at Cambridge, but there may well have been one.

**1909: 16 July. Sophocles, *Electra*** (Court Theatre, 15-17 July; Wearing 2014a, p. 483; P8). Woolf joined her brother-in-law Clive Bell (1881-1964) and Saxon Sydney-Turner (1880-1962)<sup>11</sup> (Stephen, *Diary*, p. 39) for one of its three performances, in Greek «with the most approved modern accent»<sup>12</sup>, staged in aid of the Bedford

<sup>8</sup> On his music, see Marshall 2016, p. 272. Parry conducted at the matinee Virginia attended (*LS/JMS*, 25 Nov. 1903), which may explain the Lushingtons' attendance in order to see a neighbour, and friend, frequently mentioned in the diary of the another daughter, Margaret Lushington (e.g., pp. 14, 16, and 19, ed. Curtis 2002).

<sup>9</sup> The evidence is in an unpublished letter of 17 February 1904 from Lytton Strachey to Leonard Woolf (*LS/LW*), in which he referred to Adrian's condition and mentioned the object of his feelings as 'Basileia', which he could have assumed that a classicist like Leonard Woolf would grasp.

<sup>10</sup> Fowler 1999, p. 230, quotes just the bird-like sounds at *Birds* 260-262 in referring to this incident. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Woolf has the troubled veteran Septimus Warren Smith hear two sparrows «sing ... in Greek words ... how there is no death» (p. 22). Had she heard anything that specific in 1904, she would probably have recorded it.

<sup>11</sup> On Sydney-Turner, a Cambridge contemporary of Bell, and friend of Virginia, see Todd 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Here «accent» must mean pronunciation, and the reference must be to a revised and standardised pronunciation approved by the Classical Association in 1907, embodied in the latest edition of a manual (Arnold-Conway 1908), and employed in Bedford's production of *Medea* with University College in 1907 (P6).

College for Women's building fund. In her essay *On Not Knowing Greek* of 1925 (*Essays* 4, pp. 40-41), she had a short digression on this play, which may reflect her experience of having seen it performed. Bedford College also staged a fund-raising production of Euripides' *Alcestis* in a translation by Gerald Warre Cornish (1875-1916)<sup>13</sup> in one of the college's buildings in Regent's Park on **16-19 February 1910**<sup>14</sup>, which Woolf may have attended, since her brother Adrian Leslie (1883-1948), a «grim lank figure» (he was well over six feet tall) took the role of Thanatos (P11-12)<sup>15</sup>.

**1909: 27 November. Aristophanes, *Wasps*** (New Theatre, Cambridge, 26-27, 29-30 Nov.; 1 Dec.; P9). Lytton Strachey on 26 November mentioned to Woolf that «The so-called [Cambridge] Greek Play» had begun, and added «I imagine you will go on Saturday [27th]», while staying with «the George Darwins» (Strachey

<sup>13</sup> Venn 1954, II.ii, p. 139. A Cambridge classicist and former cleric, Warre Cornish was at the time the Sixth Form Classics Master at University College School, for which he originally prepared his translation, and later (1910-1914) lecturer at the University of Manchester, where for the first production in Greek of Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*, in Britain he trained the chorus in dance techniques based on the innovative Dalcroze method of eurhythmics (Cecil 1990, p. 78 and Conway 1916). He was also the brother-in-law of Desmond MacCarthy (1877-1952), a literary and dramatic critic, and close friend of Virginia and Adrian Stephen, and the Bells.

<sup>14</sup> An advertisement for this production is among the letters at *CB/ST*. Clive Bell (Bell 1911 = Bell 1928, pp. 131-133) reviewed a later Bedford College production in Greek of Sophocles, *Trachiniai* (6-8 July 1911, Court Theatre; Wearing 2014b, p. 96). It, and an earlier production, also in Greek and involving the same college, of Euripides' *Medea* (University College, London, 13-15 June 1907; P6), may have attracted Woolf, who in the case of the second event also lived nearby, at 29 Fitzroy Square. Wearing 2014a, p. 374 lists (07.307) a production of *Medea* in October and November 1907 at the Savoy Theatre in Murray's translation, but misunderstands a reference in a review (P7) to be a claim that the earlier production at University College also used Murray's translation, which was only «for the use of the audience», not the actors.

<sup>15</sup> It was his second performance within a week, since on 10 February he and others, including Virginia, had perpetrated what has become known as the *Dreadnought* hoax, in which a group of friends impersonated the Emperor of Ethiopia and his entourage at Weymouth, and were given a tour of a battleship (Stephen 1936).

2005, p. 190). Sir George Darwin (1845-1912), Professor of Astronomy, was Charles Darwin's son, a friend of Virginia's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, at whose house, Newnham Grange, she had stayed on earlier occasions. Strachey thought that she would be «dreadfully bored», and added that «there's to be no one beautiful». He was alluding to Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) who in the previous Cambridge Greek play, the *Eumenides* of 1906 (New Theatre, 30 November-5 December), had created something of a sensation in the non-speaking role of the Herald, when even *The Times* described him as «exceedingly beautiful» (P5)<sup>16</sup>. The music in 1909, still a popular suite, was composed by Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958), the husband of Virginia's cousin, Adeline (Fisher) (P10)<sup>17</sup>.

**1912: 20 January. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*** (Covent Garden, 15 Jan.-3 Feb; Wearing 2014b, p. 124). Leonard Woolf's diary (Putzel 2012, p. 202) shows that on 20 January he and Virginia saw this production, given in Gilbert Murray's translation, with John Martin Harvey (1863-1944) as Oedipus in a role that this actor would frequently reprise. The controversial primitivism of Max Reinhardt's *mise en scène* of a play allowed to be performed for the first time

<sup>16</sup> Woolf had been unable to see any of the performances, which began just ten days after the death of her brother Thoby, on 20 November (P4). When this play was first performed at Cambridge in 1885 (1-5 Dec.), her later tutor in Greek, Janet Elizabeth Case (1863-1937; Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice*, pp. 181-184, and *Essays* 6, pp. 111-114), had appeared in the role of Athena, the only female actress so engaged until 1950.

<sup>17</sup> This was the last Cambridge Greek Play she is known to have seen. She was aware of the translation by her friend, the poet R.C. Trevelyan (1872-1951), which accompanied the Greek text published for the adapted version of the *Oresteia* (*Letters* 2, p. 601), the 1921 play (New Theatre, 2-9 Mar.), but did not see the partial replication of the production in translation at the Chiswick Empire a year later (P14). In March 1936, she was invited to attend the production of Aristophanes, *Frogs* (Marshall 2015) by a former assistant at the Hogarth Press, then fellow of King's College, George 'Dadie' Rylands (1902-1999) (Woolf, *Letters* 6, p. 10; cf. *Diary* 5, pp. 5-6). She is not, however, known to have gone to Cambridge for any of the nine performances at the Arts Theatre during the rest of that week (Marshall 2015, p. 194 with n. 57), nor to the Chiswick Empire when the Cambridge production was remounted there on 28 November 1936 (Marshall 2015, pp. 195-196; P18).

by the censor, the Lord Chamberlain, gave this production particular significance (P13 and Murray 1912). It was reviewed by Clive Bell (Bell 1912b = Bell 1928, pp. 126-131).

**1923: February. Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*** (Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club Theatre, 3 and 5-7 Feb.; P15). Woolf was the guest at King's College of John Tressider Sheppard (1881-1968), then at the start of his decades-long directorship of the Cambridge Greek Play, and attended one of the performances given in his translation to raise funds for that triennial event. She wrote that «I think I was genuinely excited, rather than moved by Oedipus Rex. The plot is so well tied; the storys [*sic*] race so fast. Then the young men's faces; pink & plump under their wigs, moved me» (*Diary 2*, p. 230), and added «I don't know whether memory poured a little mist», referring presumably to her attendance at the Greek plays of 1900, 1903 and 1909.

**1925: 9 May. Euripides' *Helen and Cyclops*** (Chiswick Empire; P16). Woolf, the ballerina Lydia Lopokova (1892-1981), who a few months later married the economist John Maynard Keynes, and the novelist Berta Ruck (1878-1978), attended a matinee performance, arranged primarily for schoolchildren, of J.T. Sheppard's translations of these plays, to which the translator gave an introductory talk<sup>18</sup>.

**1938: 9 May. Sophocles' *Electra*** (London Theatre Studio, Islington; alternate nights 6-16 May; P19-20), in J.T. Sheppard's translation, was included in a programme seen by Virginia and Leonard Woolf primarily because Virginia's niece, Angelica Bell (1918-2012; m. Garnett 1942), had a major role in an unrelated dance performance (Woolf, *Diary 5*, p. 139; Todd 2022). She was just completing a two-year course at the Studio, an innovative training school recently established by the French director Michel St Denis (1897-1971).

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, *Diaries 3*, p.17 and *Letters 3*, p. 182; P12. The event is fictionalized at Sellars 2022, pp. 181-186. On Berta Ruck's involvement see Gillespie 2004, p. 118 n. 15.

**1938: 27 July. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*** (Open Air Theatre at Regent's Park, London, 19-30 July; Wearing 2014c, p. 693; P21)<sup>19</sup>. The Woolfs saw Angelica Bell perform this time as a member of the chorus in a production involving a major actress, Gladys Cooper (1888-1971), in the title role (*Diary* 5, p. 158), with Benjamin Bickley Rogers's translation as the script<sup>20</sup>.

**Abstract.**

Between 1900 and 1938, Virginia Woolf (1881-1941)<sup>21</sup> saw a number of productions of ancient Greek dramas in Cambridge and London, at a time when such plays were being increasingly produced in British schools and universities, and in the professional theatre, both in the original language and in translation. The present inventory is of performances she is known to have attended, though she may well have seen others not mentioned in her letters or diaries<sup>22</sup>.

**Keywords.**

Virginia Woolf, Cambridge University, Greek Plays.

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<sup>19</sup> In 1910 Woolf had reviewed a performance of *Lysistrata* (Little Theatre, London, 10 Oct.-5 Nov. 1910), adapted and modernised by Lawrence Housman (*Essays* 6, pp. 372-375).

<sup>20</sup> Angelica's legal father Clive Bell (her natural father was the painter Duncan Grant; Hussey 2021, pp. 180-182) had reviewed this translation twenty-six years earlier (Bell 1912a = Bell 1928, pp. 99-114).

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Stephen married Leonard Woolf in August 1912, but will be referred to consistently as Woolf.

<sup>22</sup> On a visit to Syracuse Virginia and Leonard Woolf saw, on 14 April 1927 (Putzel 2012, p. 205 reports «Greek Theatre» as Leonard Woolf's diary entry), what appears to have been a rehearsal at the open-air theatre for that year's production the following week of *Medea* (Bordignon 2012, pp. 82-94 and 244). She mentioned seeing «Medea in a sulphur-coloured wig, and Alcestis [*sic*] in a bowler and overcoat, shouting their parts» (Woolf, *Letters* 3, p. 364), but, given her well-known tendency to whimsy and exaggeration, it is impossible to pinpoint the event.

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- P12. *The Alcestis of Euripides*, «The Westminster Gazette» 19 Feb. 1910, p. 7.
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<sup>23</sup> I have adopted the convention of treating the definite article as equivalent to quotation marks in the titles of plays.



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