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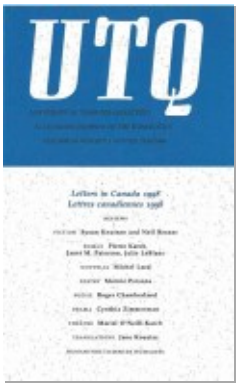
Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece by Jennifer Wise (review)



Rush Rehm

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vide all the known contemporary documentation for the Ur III kings and their courtiers. The availability of this data will facilitate subsequent research on many aspects of Ur III society. In addition, sources from/for peripheral cities on the frontier are included: Mari, Karahar, Kimash, Urkish, and Nawar. Occasional maps provide excellent supplemental data on geographical issues touched upon often throughout the text. Indexes of museum and excavation numbers and a concordance of selected publications facilitate the cross-checking of the sources with previous publications. And finally, a microfiche containing the transliteration scores of 108 inscriptions is included in a pocket in the rear cover.

Frayne's publication is in keeping with the high standards of scholarship that we have come to associate with the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. The publication reflects wide international co-operation by a handful of dedicated scholars – historians, philologists and archaeologists – whose major preoccupation is the recovery of ancient Near Eastern civilization, the wellspring of our own Western civilization. This volume and the others, published and forthcoming, rank among the great intellectual endeavours to reconstruct the remote early history of the ancient Near Eastern world. Frayne is to be congratulated once again for an outstanding accomplishment. (DAVID I. OWEN)

Jennifer Wise. *Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece*
Cornell University Press. x, 270. US $39.95

This book makes large claims for writing – not good writing or bad writing (which, sadly, characterizes much of the book), but writing *per se*. According to Wise, this technological innovation enabled ancient Athenians to invent the theatre. She denies ritual influence, without discussing important recent work (Seaford's *Reciprocity and Ritual*). She dodges Aristotle's views on the natural growth of the theatre from earlier performance genres (epic and dithyramb), all but ignoring the influence of lyric poetry. The new technology of alphabetic writing *tout court* provides the originating impulse and requisite historical conditions for inventing the theatre.

But the theatre may be the least of this technology's accomplishments. Scattered through four lengthy chapters we learn that alphabetic writing also accounted for the rise of the visual, of ideology, self-consciousness, competition, the high (mind)/low (body) problem, even Plato's metaphysics ('Without appearing to have recognized what he was doing ... '). No matter that Plato in *Phaedrus* associates writing with impermanence and flux; for Wise, the 'decontextualized writing situation' holds the key to Platonic ontology, the abstract alphabet as model for the Forms.

Sceptical of primitivist claims for ritual influence on early theatre, the author succumbs to her own primitive reduction of 'preliterate' poetry,

which lacks narrative subtlety, self-awareness, or the possibility of fictional play. She seems unaware of the work on Homeric poetics of the past quarter-century (Nagler, Austin, Edwards, Ford, Mackie), claiming that 'epic is so strictly limited to praise that [quoting Jaeger from 1945!] "everything low, contemptible, and ugly is banished from the world of the epic."' So much for the suitors, or Achilles battering the corpse of Hector. Without the verbal ambiguity that only comes from writing, Homeric poems cannot but deliver 'a transparency of meaning.' What of Penelope's ruse? Odysseus's lying tales? the verbal trick on Cyclops? Homeric complexity and continuity with tragic theatre gets lost in a desiccated application of Derridean *faux*-linguistics. As Raymond Tallis cleverly reminds us in his recent book, we (at least) should remain *Not Saussure*.

Wise needs an oral culture trapped in transparency to provide a foil for alphabetic writing, which allows the theatre to do things Homer couldn't have dreamed of when he was nodding. And so 'the art of the epic ... was rendered culturally superfluous almost overnight by the advent of the alphabet.' Simple facts can pose problems for big theories, and the continued popularity of epic (and other nontheatrical) poetry through the fifth and fourth centuries underlines the basic problem the book fails to engage: oral and written culture flourished together for centuries in Greece, and elsewhere. The technology of the alphabet did *not* have the immediate and total transformative power that Wise (outdoing Havelock) claims.

In fact, relatively few Athenians were literate, in the sense that they were daily readers of anything, and the vast majority could read nothing at all. There was no publicly funded schooling in democratic Athens, which suggests that literacy was not a high priority for *polis* self-government. Even the evidence of *ostraka* – pottery fragments with names for ostracism, with which Wise goes to town in 'Economies of Inscription' – shows scribes at work, with the same hand identified as the 'author' of many different shards. Wise's insistence that ancient actors were readers before they were anything else flies in the face of evidence that they were *read to*, the preferred method of memorizing texts in the ancient world. Athenian public inscriptions in the classical period operated more as monuments than as texts, as Charles Hedricks (unmentioned by Wise) has shown. The importance of 'written laws' – crucial to her chapter 'Courtroom Dramas' – was more notional than functional, as Rosalind Thomas points out in *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, a work Wise frequently cites without mentioning its conclusion regarding the limited extent and significance of ancient literacy.

The conclusion, 'Theatre and Technology,' redeems the book somewhat, arguing that the 'continued presence of real stuff on stage' means the theatre can handle *any* technology. The earliest theatre, we discover, constitutes a critique of the alphabetic literacy that brought it into being! So we are encouraged to regurgitate the strange potion the book has asked us to swallow. If only we could live forever. (RUSH REHM)