East and West

A podcast with Michael Scott and Marchella Ward

introduced by Claire Barnes

Recorded March 2020

Claire Barnes
Welcome everybody to the APGRD podcast “Staging the Archive”. It's a slightly unusual one this time in that we are all recording remotely for such as the time that we're all in. So, we hope you can give us the benefit of your patience with the recording quality, but hopefully the quality of the knowledge that our speakers will be imparting will be more than enough to make up for that. I am joined today by two speakers – so, we have Dr Chella Ward, who may be familiar to some of you as she completed her default here at Oxford, which involves working very closely with the APGRD, including a spell in the role which I'm in now as archivist-administrator. She's now Tinsley Outreach Fellow at Worcester College, and is currently working on a project which I'm sure she'll explain far better than me, but she's looking at spectators, and how audiences engage and how audiences respond, particularly when Greek plays are taken in a global context, rather than a specifically Western one. If that sounds right, Chella, surely you can correct me in a moment. And we're also very privileged to be joined by Professor Michael Scott, who is professor of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Warwick – and Michael is also very well known for his publications as well as TV and radio works, particularly *Invisible Cities*, BBC Two, which you may have encountered. He's currently working on a research project which looks at correlation between cultures in antiquity – so, following on from a publication on the same topic. So, welcome to both of you.

Marchella Ward
Thank you, thanks very much for having us and thank you for that wonderful introduction. You kind of summed up my working on Greek theatres by saying that it relates to Greek theatre in a global context. I would say that's because I'm interested in Greek theatre properly speaking as a global phenomenon, by which I mean, not in trying to make Greek theatre seem global, but in respecting the fact that Greek theatre was always a hugely expensive thing, travelled a huge amount, dealt with huge numbers of different kinds of cultures and societies and civilizations. I think some of what we're going to talk about today precisely troubles that idea that there is a sort of Western context for these plays – which, of course, were never and have never been Western, to such an extent that the idea of the West could even really exist outside of a kind of narrow ideological positioning of East versus West, but that's something I suppose we'll come on to when we talk about these objects.

Michael Scott
Just to say thank you very much indeed for the welcome as well, Claire, it's a great pleasure to be here to join me for and you, Chella, for this discussion. Chella has been brilliant in picking up some objects from the collection to kick us off, which I think are also going to be available to listeners as a blog to be able to have a look at. I think we're kicking off with a version of Hecuba from the 80s in Los Angeles, is that right, Marchella?

Marchella Ward
Yes, that's right – this is a *Hecuba* that was performed in 1987. We're looking at the program, we should probably start there, to this *Hecuba*. It's a program that has on its cover this kind of slightly bizarre image, it has what looks like a globe, so it's sort of a round circle, with a slightly imprecisely drawn map – we'll come on to what's weird about the map in a minute – with the kind of sickle and hammer symbol on what on one side of the map and the flag of the United States across the bottom of it. I think that's speaking to what the production team, and indeed the reviewers who saw this production, are thinking of as a kind of political repositioning, but also geographical repositioning of this play. In the director's notes, the director asks us to – I'm quoting him from the program – "Suppose that the Greeks are Israelis, that the Trojans of Palestinians, that the Thracians are one of the clashing political factions in Lebanon. Suppose that the gods are the superpowers Europe early in the century, the United States and the Soviet Union now. Now watch and hear the story that Euripides tells, the story of Hecuba". So, we're being set up in this production for a particular kind of political retelling of this story.

Michael Scott
It's worth underlining that the director himself was Lebanese-American. As a result, obviously this kind of retelling and resetting is a very personal one for the director. I mean, the thing that struck as Chella already marked out is the map that's on the front page. Either this is a very bad map draw-er, who's trying to offer a vision of the globe, or else it's a very particularized map to reinforce the idea of particularly the gods and the superpowers of the world that he's created for his *Hecuba*. Because you're seeing recognisably America and Central America over on the left. But on the right, I was struck by the fact that European and African landmass conglomerate, it's almost like the world has been sent back several tectonic ages into the past, because we've lost the Mediterranean Sea, there's a little bit of the Middle East, a little bit of Russia at the top, with poor old Britain completely left off the map entirely, it feels. So, I would suggest that the viewers coming into see this production got a very, very loaded sense of what this production was going to be about in terms of the political messages it wanted to put forward before even the lights

went down, and the curtain went up and that's reinforced as Chella's read out from the inside cover of the production. But, I mean, initially, I wasn't that perturbed by that. I think we're all pretty used to going to watch productions of Greek tragedy that have set themselves in "x" location. I mean, I remember going with a very good friend of mine, who is Serbian, to see a Sophocles' *Antigone* set in Serbia, following on from the conflicts of former-Yugoslavia. I don't think this perturbs us. What really surprised me was when Chella provided the reviews that linked to this production, where back in the 80s, at least in Los Angeles in America, they seem to have been very perturbed by this.

Marchella Ward
Yes, I think that's absolutely right, Michael, we're totally used to Greek tragedy being used to speak to whatever the issue of the day is, right? That's kind of one of the things we see all the time with Greek tragedy is we get a load of *Medeas* around conversations to do with women's rights, we get loads of versions of the *Persians* around the time of Iraq War, for instance. That's something that Greek tragedy can pick up on those issues in interesting ways. One of the reviews begins with the headline *Hecuba* moves to the Middle East in updated Euripides and throughout the review, what we get is this sense that the review was really shocked to see that this play could speak to it to a Middle East in context. The review talks about – talks about, that's maybe too neutral a term – the reviewer really doesn't like the fact that, as he puts it, the characters, so the actors who are playing the Trojan Women, are wearing traditional Arab dress, or are singing to Middle Eastern melodies. That's sort of positioned as being really too much of a stretch for this play that we really should have thought of properly as a Greek play, and not a play that was full of this kind of Middle Eastern stuff. That's something that to me is really, I was about to say surprising, but perhaps it's not surprising, because there has been, as I'm sure, listeners are aware, a tradition of wanting Greek tragedy to seem like it was the beginning of Western civilization, of a Western theatrical tradition. So it's not surprising in a sense that reviewers didn't like this Middle Eastern version. But it does say something interesting in this play, right? it sheds light on a particular kind of historical oversight, I think, because *Hecuba* – I don't know if people know the story of the *Hecuba* – written by Euripides, it's set in a camp on the coast of Thrace. Hecuba is Trojan and she's the wife of Priam, who's the king of Troy and Troy, as far as we know, has been thought of as being in different places over the long kind of history of thinking about where archaeologically speaking Troy might be. We usually tend to say Hisarlik, which is in modern-day Turkey. So we're talking about a play that is both set and involving a crucial character from ancient Turkey, that kind of coast of the ancient Middle East. So, the sense that it's surprising to find it

there doesn't really make sense in terms of in terms of where we think that play really might belong.

Michael Scott
I guess what really surprised me also following on from that is the sense that in America in the 80s, there was this clearly – in relation to this play, and I presume to others at the time – a dislike of seeing it located to a part of the world that in reality it was very much associated with and took place not far from. I'm trying to relate that into my sense of how America has wanted to conceptualize, own and sort of break off from that connectivity to the rest of the world, the Greeks as an entity, and obviously their cultural creations like Greek tragedy. It's one of the things that always surprised me that even when you look at the debates of the founding fathers for the US Constitution, at that stage, 18th century, they are absolutely not wanting to be anything like or associated with the ancient Greek, at least political model. If you look in those debates, it's things like “you know what, even if every ancient Athenian citizen had been a Socrates, ancient Greek democracy would still have been just completely mass ruled by an uncouth, unruly kind of mass of people. We don't want that, right” and they deliberately go “we want republican Roman models, that's what we want”. So, I guess what I'm trying to understand is at what point and how, between that sort of distancing from wanting anything to do with ancient Greece, at least politically, we've got to a stage by the 1980s, whereby suddenly, actually, ‘Greekness’ can't be anything that is anything except a Western, almost American creation.

Marchella Ward
Yes, there really is this kind of crucial period between in which this play was being written, because by the time we get to the early 90s, we've got things like Samuel Huntington cluster of civilizations article being written where the premise of that article is that there are these two blocks, the East and the West, and they will always be fighting each other. That's an article that has really kind of frightening origins, it has to do with the work of an historian of the Middle East called Bernard Lewis, who wrote a number of different articles, hugely Islamophobic articles, about the relationship between Islam and the West, where he wanted precisely to situate Islam as the opposite of the West – which became, in the mid-90s, part of American foreign policy too that the Middle East, particularly because a number of nations were Islamic, or at least majority Islamic, was positioned during those kind of crucial years as the opposite culturally to the West, but not just the opposite to it, but sort of violently opposed to it. And that becomes part of a lot of the rhetoric that surrounds the Iraq War, too. So, I think I see the response to this place sitting in a kind of interesting place, because reviewers are sort of feigning surprise at seeing Euripides in the Middle East. Precisely as you say, Michael, I think

in order to distance the idea of greatness from the Middle East, and to claim the idea of Greekness for a kind of white American, but also white European foundation myth – that would, through Huntington's article, come to be kind of popularized as Western civilization, as a kind of clash of civilizations narrative. So, this is a play that belongs to a particular moment in that conversation, I think.

Michael Scott
I guess, sadly, it links into a moment, which is still very much continuing, I'm thinking of the work of the Pharos project at the moment that is documenting the still very extensive use of ancient Greek exemplar to try and bolster and support very xenophobic, homophobic political views, but equally more widely to still continue to justify this idea of both Western civilization as a common concept in and of itself, but equally as Western civilization – whatever that might be – as the superior kind of civilization as well.
So, I guess it would be interesting to see what would happen now with another production of, say, *Hecuba* or another play that was set again somewhere in the Middle East, kind of post all the most recent political events and turmoil, and see whether the reaction is any different.

Marchella Ward
I think sadly, or not just sadly, kind of deeply problematically, the reaction is not all that different, right? We saw with that production, *Queens of Syria*, not so long ago, which was a version of the *Trojan Women* that had a Syrian chorus made up of refugees and the reactions or the way that that was written about was, again, with a kind of surprise, as if it was surprising to find displaced women using the words of a Greek playwright. I think, as you were saying about Pharos, that project, one of the moments documented by Pharos is the moment in I think 2016, when a white supremacist far right group – at the time known as Identity Europa, it's now known as the American Identity Movement – plastered these posters all over American college campuses, and with slogans that said things like “protect our heritage”. The picture on all of those posters was the statue of Apollo Belvedere, which is a Roman copy of a Greek statue. And it's a white marble statue, so it plays into all of those mistaken ideas about the idea that the Greeks and the Romans must have been white, because all their statues are made of white marble, and, of course, we know that's absolutely untrue. Of course, we know that at the time the statues were coloured with paint. But it almost doesn't matter that that was true, right? Because none of those people, no one who volunteered their time with Identity Europa and other horrendous white supremacist organizations has ever seriously wanted to investigate racial and ethnic diversity in the ancient world. That's never been a concern, whether what those statues were actually really like, has never really worried them. I think, what has always

been happening in that conversation about Western civilization is that the Western civilization narrative has given us the idea that there is something about the West that must be protected from this thing that is called the East. So that's dangerous, not only because it gives us this hugely reductive vision of the ancient world that leads to this kind of interpretation that it's surprising somehow to find Hecuba in the Middle East when in fact the Middle East is precisely where she's from. But it's not that that's not the problem, it's the huge violence on the other end that is legitimated by this idea that there is an East in the West, and that one is the kind of superior culture that needs to be protected from the barbarism of the other.

Michael Scott
I guess, yes, it kind of flies in the face of what everything we know about the very myths themselves that made up these great tragedies in the first place, that they were stories that were meant to be and were constantly being told and retold and presented and represented and adapted and extended, and that has, thankfully, continued in some ways in some places. I'm struck by how much this seems to me to be an example of "this stuff is not for you and is not about you and is only for and about us", in comparison to the other example that you've pulled from the archives, which seems to me, if we zoom right to the other end of the geographical kind of a spectrum, we're now setting ourselves in Beijing in China, to be very much an attempt, to show how these same tragedies are universal and are meant for everyone and can be for everyone. This is an example, I think, from just a decade later from the 90s, is that right?

Marchella Ward
Yeah, absolutely. So, this is a collaborative production between an opera company from Beijing and a New York Greek theatre company. It's produced in 1996 and it's the work of actually a long-standing collaboration between a Chinese company and an American company, both obviously very high profile theatre companies who've done huge amounts of work. And it's directed by a Chinese director, Chen Shi-Zheng, and it seems very much to be, on the surface at least, about a kind of cultural meeting. We've just pulled out here the review of this production in a newspaper called *Beijing Scene* and the headline is "East-West fusion takes centre stage: the *Bacchae* of Euripides meets Peking opera". So again, it begins with the assumption that the East and the West are kind of blocks that are irreconcilable, which – for all the reasons I've just said – is a hugely problematic kind of framework to lock ourselves into, but, as you say, Michael, this is a production that sets itself out to do something different. It sets itself out to produce something that uses techniques from what it sees as both these two separate worlds. I think something that sticks out to me as really interesting from this review is the

moment where we're told that the reason that they wanted to do this, the reason that this collaboration came about in the first place is that – I'm just going to quote the review here – “of the theatrical styles vital today, Asian theatre is the closest to what Greek tragedy was really like”. So, loads of interesting stuff there. Notably how on earth would we know what Greek tragedy was really like. Also, interesting that this is a production that makes us think that in fact the perfect analogue, or the perfect way to explore what Greek theatre might have been like, is not in London in the National Theatre, or even in the theatre in Epidaurus in Greece, but might be, in fact, in an opera house in China.

Michael Scott
And not just an opera house in China, but a very particular style of Chinese production with Peking opera style, which is exemplified by, you know, very high pitched kind of notes and singing, and very stylistic movements of dance, they're heavily painted faces. A style that is felt under threat in China of being able to survive, but one, which I think also is pointed out in this review, to have its own rich tradition of absorbing other theatrical elements. So, it's a tradition which is almost designed and thrives on living and meeting and blending with kind of other styles from other places, that is being set up as the most modern equivalent to ancient Greek tragedy – which I think goes back to the point you were making at the beginning, and your particular research interest, which is talking about the global nature of tragedy from the beginning, rather than it being set in any one particular place.

Marchella Ward
Yeah, exactly. I think what is interesting here is that the reviewer points out a number of local kind of influences on this production, particular kinds of storytelling, for instance, that originate in Chinese tea houses, or are used for the messenger speeches here. So, there's an interest in seeking out what a kind of operatic tradition which is, you know, a hugely musical tradition and a hugely performative tradition, could make of Greek tragedy and could make in a way that would show us maybe something else that we wouldn't have understood about Greek tragedy, if we had only ever looked to that in a theatre in the UK, or a theatre in Greece, or theatre in America, for instance. So, what's interesting to me is that this isn't about, as the beginning of the review talks about, this being the closest to what Greek tragedy was really like – certainly, in my work, I'm not interested in reconstruction in that way, because I think we're always doing a kind of imaginative guessing, in all of our work on the ancient world we're constructing a narrative based off, often far fewer facts than we'd like to. So, I think it's interesting to think about this as an opportunity to see something else in Greek theatre that perhaps we haven't seen. But it is set up as if it were the very first time that Chinese theatre and

Greek tragedy had ever come together, and that strikes me as an unusual thing to be to be suggesting.

Michael Scott
Yes, before we get onto the point about where this tendency of mixing and matching these cultures has come from, or when it started, I was really struck by the sort of review of trying to rather gently and nicely say that it felt a bit of a mishmash, in that you were listening to Chinese Peking kind of opera style trained, Chinese actors speaking ancient Greek, that they'd had to learn by trying to find equivalated Chinese symbols. You were hearing ancient Greek music being played on Chinese instruments, you were seeing masks that were being used instead of the face paint, particular kinds of masks to allow some of the kind of range of facial expression that is normal to Peking style opera. So, you can see how they've gone above and beyond to make this a complete and equal integration of these different styles to offer something up. What struck me also, coming out at the end of the review, was the way that the director, reflecting on this process, set up Western theatre as being playwright centred, and Asian theatre as being performance centred, and how he felt ancient Greek tragedy had been a mix of the two, and that's why he had tried to bring these two styles together. Before we move on to the point about what China is doing with ancient Greek and ancient Greece, I just wondered whether we might reflect on that as being whether that playwright versus performance centred is a useful sense of either Western theatre and Asian theatre today – if we want to use those terms, as he does – or indeed the idea that Greek tragedy somehow combine the two.

Marchella Ward
Yeah, that is interesting. I think that we have wanted to see, for a long time, not so much now, but we have wanted for a long time, to see Greek theatre as being playwright centred and also as being kind of star centred. We think about there being three actors playing these main roles, and then also a chorus. Because we – most of us, at least the two of us – come from a kind of very British theatrical context, where we had in Britain a star system in the theatre, we had, for a very long time, the idea that it was particular actors who play these important roles. We talk about that star system in theatre history in the 19th century, but really, it was something that dominated the British stage for a very long time. When we talk about Shakespeare's companies, within those companies there are certain people whose names we know that roles were written especially for, Will Kempe for instance, who's one of Shakespeare's clowns. That's a famous name and the reason it's a famous name is because we know that parts were written specifically for him. So, we've got a kind of writing-led there, too, but one that is about actors, that is not about large groups of bodies moving together on a stage. When we think

about choruses in European theatres, we tend to think about them in something like a musical, or in an opera. If you go and see Arthur Miller, or Harold Pinter, or Caryl Churchill or any of those playwrights, you won't see huge choruses of people. That's partly a kind of financial conversation, it's partly because it costs a huge amount of money to train choruses and a huge amount of rehearsal time to train choruses, that has partly to do with cuts to theatre budgets, and things like that. I'm going a long way about saying that I do think there is an interesting positioning of the chorus here as crucial to this production, and I think that probably is happening in a way that it would be very difficult for that to happen in a contemporary British theatre, because of the huge costs that they would be involved in training that chorus and the huge space that you would need in order to do that. I don't think that's an East versus West thing, as I've already said I don't believe in an East versus West thing, but I don't think that purely Asian theatre – whatever the word Asian might mean, in this context – I don't think that only Asian theatre can do that, but I do think this clearly was a production that took seriously the huge performative value of having lots and lots of bodies on stage to move and to make sound.

Michael Scott
I think that's absolutely right. I just like this idea that whereas we saw a very upfront denial in the *Hecuba* example, that this could be a play for anyone else except the West. Despite the fact that it's a seeming example of universality and integration of cultures, there's a subtle underplay here going on also. Potentially, actually, the home to really understand Greek tragedy is not in its original geographical home, or any version of its original geographical home, but actually far away in the East, and it speaks to some of the stuff that I've been very surprised by in very recent years of how China has moved to position itself as very much akin with Greece, and particularly the heritage and cultural achievements of ancient Greece. I've been studying this a little bit, partly because I was in China for a couple of times through 2018 working with different institutes and institutions that study the Classics. Now, the earliest institute for the history of ancient civilizations that works on the Greeks and Romans were set up in China in the 1980s in Shijiazhuang in the Northeast, a Northern University, and is still the kind of foremost postgraduate unit for study in China, of both Greeks and Romans, but also Egypt and Syria, etc. Across different Chinese universities, there seem to be well over now 100 different Chinese academics that are working on particularly Greece and Rome, but what surprised me even more than that is the way that an appreciation for an interest in a love for particularly Ancient Greece has now exploded far beyond the ivory towers of Chinese universities, and has become much more of a popular and public phenomenon.

So, in the last couple of years, there have been blockbuster exhibitions in museums in Shanghai and in Beijing of ancient Greek objects, and this is now leavered up into increasing the number of direct flights between China and Greece, number of university concord agreements to work together. Most recently, we've seen the Antikythera mechanism on display in the Forbidden City in Beijing. You could not get a more high-profile place to have ancient Greek artefacts exhibited, and China has sent some of its, interestingly Han era, artefacts over to be shown and displayed on the Acropolis and the new Acropolis museum. We've seen this kind of increasing love affair or want to equate the great, particularly philosophical and cultural, achievements of the Han era with those of Ancient Greece. And I think this is really interesting, because when you actually try and put the two in geographical timeline together, also chronological timeline together, that obviously doesn't work at all. In fact, the chronological timeline puts the Roman Empire and the Han Empire in exactly the same time. In 2015 – some of you may have seen this movie when it came out in the cinemas – there was a movie called *Dragon Blade* that came out in 2015, that had Jackie Chan, John Cusack, Adrien Brody, and it was one of the first linkups between the Beijing Film Academy that was sponsoring movies and Hollywood, making a movie about how Han soldiers had banded together with great Roman legionaries to save the ancient Silk Roads from being taken over by nasty individual who wanted to own it all for himself. This was a massive blockbuster hit in China, it completely flopped in America. Actually, since then, it seems clear that what China does not want is a comparison and connection with Ancient Rome, and connotations of Empire, and emperors at all, what it wants is a connection with the cultural and philosophical achievements of particularly Ancient Greece. We are seeing that particularly in relation to philosophy and science, but I wonder if we're going to see that also in relation to tragedy and into drama more generally.

Marchella Ward
Yes, absolutely. I mean, it doesn't surprise me at all what you're saying about the kind of huge popularity of the ancient Greeks in China. Just anecdotally, a couple of years ago, I wrote a small children's book about ancient Greece which is coming out in September, and the only international rights that has already sold are its Chinese international rights. It's sold them almost before it went to print. That’s a book written for really tiny little children so there's clearly huge appetite for Ancient Greece and that really is not a surprising thing, right? I think we don't need to imagine that China just woke up one day and decided that it wanted to suddenly have this interest in ancient Greece, or indeed, that that comes about as some sort of process of westernization. Because there have been conversations around comparative work on, for instance, Confucianism and Ancient Greek philosophy. We have all sorts of

grammar handbooks from the early Qing Dynasty that are modelled on books for teaching Latin grammar. So, I don't think we need to imagine that this is a totally new thing, I think its pace is picking up and hopefully that will teach us something really important, which is that, the British, the Americans, other Europeans, other large groups of white people who had for a long time wanted to claim that they alone had a special relationship with ancient Greece are increasingly going to find that their relationship with ancient Greece was precisely as constructed as anyone else's. There's no reason why a writer sitting in their study, somewhere in North London, should be more likely to draw on the plays of Aeschylus than someone sitting in their study in Beijing, for instance. I don't see an intrinsic separation there. So, it's exciting that we are about to come to learn that, but I don't think it's a new thing.

Michael Scott
I think that's absolutely right. What is obviously driving the supersizing – if we might call it that – of this relationship right now is the modern politics of China coming forward with this new One Belt, One Road and the part that Greece plays in that. The port of Piraeus is now principally Chinese owned and Greece is China's entry point into Europe. And I think it's fascinating that China has so very cleverly, and Greece's equally responded, kind of developed this new link between ancient cultures, which then leads on to modern cultural collaboration and financial collaboration and geopolitical collaboration. Because it is using what those in the *Hecuba* reviewer-esque have been claiming as the quintessential foundation of Western civilization, the ancient Greeks, as the tool to hive off part of Europe, Greece to make it look more eastwards and be more a friend to China moving forward than it is to Europe and to the West. This was seen most recently, Xi Jinping made a visit to Greece and two premiers work bonding together very obviously and they've even set something up – I found that out the other day – called "The Great Civilizations Forum", which is a new, global collaboration between all modern countries who are home to great ancient civilizations. So, this is Italy, Greece, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, China, Peru, and I think Bolivia is in there as well. As a group of people at the moment, it's sort of soft power through cultural connection through being home to these ancient civilizations, but its stated, future purpose is very much to act as a new financial kind of power play within the world. So, I think we are only just at the beginning of this supersizing process of seeing connections made between modern countries through their ancient cultures and using that to influence modern world affairs going forward. I did want to pose more questions, because Chella and I were both thinking about the slight weirdness of going back into the 90s. This first play that you choose in this new collaboration between the New York Greek Drama Theatre and the Chinese national Beijing opera, why did they pick the *Bacchae* of all the plays? Because, I don't know about you, but it is not, and

no tragedy's cheery, but this is not, by any means, the cheeriest production to put on stage and it strikes me actually as a very weird choice!

Marchella Ward
Yes, it's hard to know whether that's a choice that's motivated by the kind of smaller reputation that the *Bacchae* has of being a play that is about somebody who might be Asian. Dionysus, when he arrives at the beginning of that play, he's very keen to tell us in the very first words, he says, as he opens his mouth, and his disguise, as I'm sure some will remember he's disguised as his own priest at this point, but the very first words that come out of his mouth are that he's just been to other places, he's just come from, he lists all these other places. So he lists Lydia, he talks about visiting the Persians, he talks about Arabia and then at the end of his list, he also says that he's been in Asia. What those various geographical terms might have meant at that point in the fifth century, I think, is maybe something we'll have to leave for another day, but, I think, what's interesting about this play is that it's often carried with it the idea – or people have imputed to it the idea – that this is a play about what happens when a kind of Asian religion in the form literally of a person, of the god Dionysus, comes into a sort of Greek setting. Obviously, people can't see because it's a podcast, but when you were talking about great civilizations, Michael, I was sort of raising my eyebrows and almost touching the sky, because, obviously, civilization is an idea that does a huge amount of damage. The idea that certain people are civilized and certain people are not is a very ancient idea, but it's one that allows the huge mistreatment of huge numbers of people, and is connected to the enslavement of people and all these various different kinds of horrendous things. But to me the idea that this is an Asian god, this is a God who's from somewhere that is not Greek, coming into a kind of civilized Greek world, is what makes me kind of wonder whether there's something about this choice that isn't just the kind of optimistic, oh we can all share Greek tragedy, collaborative effort that this newspaper article is kind of positioning this play in the 90s to be, because the *Bacchae* is about the huge amount of destruction that has caused the death of Pentheus. In fact, not just the death of Pentheus, but his beheading and dismemberment caused by his mother. So, what happens is Dionysus bewitches his mother so that she sees her own son Pentheus as a lion and she then tears off his head and proudly goes back to the city saying that she's beheaded this lion, but that comes about as a kind of punishment of Dionysus. So, what we've got here is a structure of a play that is about a God who comes from somewhere else, somewhere that's kind of explicitly set up as not the sort of civilized Greek world in which we are in the play, and brings with him huge amounts of violence, huge amounts of destruction, also different ways of troubling the false binaries of gender, because we're told throughout the play that Dionysus makes the women

behave in a way that they wouldn't normally behave, or they shouldn't behave. So, it's an interesting play to choose for this collaboration, because it's precisely not a play that is optimistic about what happens when different cultures connect. It's a play that has underneath it the idea that there might be something about this Asiatic God that might be dangerous to the Greeks that he interacts with.

Michael Scott
I think that's absolutely right. For me seeing this play, or imagining being in the audience, seeing this play in the 90s in Beijing, again it's all those different layers. There is the idea that there is a universality of poetry and of cultural production, that a play is something which speaks to humanity into the range of emotions, that all humanity has irrespective of background, of which this is supposed to be a recognized masterpiece of Euripides, it is to be able to speak to all of those emotions, that it is a play that can go anywhere. But, as you say, it is a play about what happens when someone comes from a very foreign culture and starts to mess everything up within the culture that he, the God, is inserting himself into. And equally, I think there's another layer there for me, which is about what religion does to a society and what it messes up, or the powerful nature of religion within society. I think that, particularly coming in and thinking about the kind of often difficult place of religion within modern Chinese culture, particularly given the director apparently used specific gestures, from Tao rituals from within different parts of China, they're incorporated into the performance, I think, if you were the Chinese spectator of this performance, you wouldn't but be able to see something of the difficult kind of relationship between the Chinese state and religion kind of within this play as well. So, I think this is actually a fascinating example of very, very multi layered textual kind of references, where we're thinking about how this would have gone down as an example of interaction between different cultures and reception within its own particular culture as well.

Marchella Ward
I think it also shows us why conversations around the problematic nature of the division between East and West are not over, because, even in this play, that seems very much to be about collaboration, to be about the sort of sharing of the idea of an ancient heritage, even then, we're still seeing classics, doing the work of marking out one culture as powerful and superior and civilized, and another culture as violent, as barbaric, as causing a problem for that civilized culture. So, I think this is something that we see ancient literature doing throughout its kind of long history also of being attached to the violent colonialism of the British Empire too. You look at the different things that Greek literature, Latin literature were being used to do in, in colonized India, for instance, which was sort of about seeming on the

surface to give cultural capital, but within that cultural capital, was idea that what you had to learn was the supremacy of the British, what you were going to learn by being given ancient literature was a white supremacist vision of an idealized Europe, that was a kind of a colonizer figure. So, I think that's why having a conversation that picks up how in both of these instances, the reviewers are registering a surprise to find a connection with East and West, when really, as we've said, for a whole number of different reasons, it's not at all surprising to find classics in these various different kinds of places. The reasons why it's surprising though are really important, because the reasons why it's surprising is because we have allowed ancient literature and the idea of the classical world to be weaponised as a tool that works to confirm the supremacy of certain kinds of people who are positioned as closer to that ancient civilization. So, I'm thinking of the way in which, for instance, when the British Museum was built, it was built with that huge kind of Athenian colonnade thing, with the aim of setting up Britain as the obvious inheritor to these riches, when, in fact, those things were stolen, and were then used to position the supremacy of precisely those countries that had stolen them. So, I think asking the “why” question here is as important as looking at what happened and what was said about what happened.

Claire Barnes
That seems a fitting place to end for now, although I'm sure we could continue the conversation much longer. Very, very fascinating, I'm sure the listeners will agree, particularly those explorations into the politics of national identity, self-identified privileged positions with the classics, which is something that definitely always bears further investigation. I don't know about anyone else, but I've been queuing up the “Ancient Civilizations Forum” on Google to look at after this because that's something I had no idea of, and it's very, very interesting, something to observe the future of. So, thank you so much to both Chella and Michael for joining us. As mentioned, there'll be an accompanying blog post so you can take a look at the items which our guest speakers have been discussing. Do get in touch with us if you have any further questions relating to the podcast.