



The Athenaeum Lecture Series

The Mimetic Ideal of Greek Drama: Engaging Actors' Bodily Imagination with Poetry

Lecture by Dr. **Robert Emil Berge** (Postdoctoral Fellow, History / Classical Greek, MF
Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society)



(Red-figured bell-krater with Orestes kneeling beside the omphalos and tripod at Delphi, as he seeks sanctuary from the avenging Furies. Athena and Apollo intervene on his behalf, and he is purified of the killing of his mother; © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license)

The lecture will take place on **Tuesday, 11 February 2025, at 7:00 p.m. (EST)** at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, Tsami Karatasou 5, 11742 (the lecture will also be streamed online via Zoom)

Registration is required for both in-person and virtual attendance.

To attend **in-person**, please register at norwinst@uib.no

To attend **via Zoom**, please register via the following link:

https://uib.zoom.us/meeting/register/zU-deCAURyShLqQ2w_YRkw



Abstract

How were the texts of Greek drama used in the productions of their performances? They consist only of the words spoken or sung during the performance. In their ancient form they had no stage directions or speaker assignments. They were composed to be performed at festivals in Athens, with the aim of winning one specific dramatic contest. This all suggests that the poet needed to be present to instruct the actors, both in who should say what and in the actions he had envisioned should take place on stage. Hence, he would not have much concern for how the text would be used after the first performance, either for readers or for re-performances. This is also the prevailing scholarly view.

In this lecture I will address some of the problems with this view and suggest an alternative interpretation of the role that dramatic texts had in the production of ancient performances. First, how is it possible that texts that were composed for one occasion only, containing only the verbal layer of a complex performance work, have been preserved and had such an impact on Western culture as they have had? Second, if the poets had no concern for future readers or performances, should we not expect the dramatic texts, spoken words severed from the non-verbal content on stage, at least at times, to fail to convey complete situations and stories?

My solution to these problems is to abandon the idea that dramatic poetry is purely occasional. By close reading of dramatic texts, I have seen that it is possible to determine who the speaker is at any time, without any speaker assignments or indications of change of speaker. It is also clear that this is a deliberate feature of the text. This means that the poets envisioned a future life for their dramatic poetry. Why, then, do texts not provide more information about the staging, for example by being accompanied by stage directions and speaker assignments? The answer to this is that dramatic poetry adheres to a mimetic ideal, where the lack of instructions opens up a creative room for the actors. The mimetic form of drama is an aesthetic device which incites actors to engage their bodily imagination to embody the characters they are representing, much in the same way that the literary device 'show, don't tell' activates the imagination of readers. Although the dramatic text provides the information needed to understand what is going on in the situations of the drama, it minimizes the use of internal 'stage directions', where characters talk about what they themselves or other characters are doing, or how it is done. Such directions would allow the actors to take an intellectual approach to the acting, instead of being led to an immediate response to the words that should be uttered. The result, when successfully done, is a more authentic expression.

Biographical Information

[Robert Emil Berge](#) is a postdoctoral researcher at the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society, where he is part of the EhtiCodex project, researching the early history of the codex. He holds a Ph.D. from NTNU (2021) with a dissertation titled Embodied Mimetic Poetry: Text and Performance of Classical Greek Drama. In addition to his academic work, he has a background as an actor and theatre instructor.