

THEATRICAL DEATHS.  
THE OBITUARY AS A SOURCE  
OF BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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From Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* to the ethics of Epicurean philosophy, and from the poetic works of William Shakespeare, culminating in *Hamlet*, to the studies of Schopenhauer, writers have attempted through their poetic or philosophical creations to help their fellow men to come to terms with, handle or simply be reconciled with the fear innate in death: the fear of loss, of the unknown and, ultimately, the awareness of mortality. However, this paper is not yet another study of the way in which poets, authors or philosophers have dealt with the subject of death. Our aim is to introduce another category to their closed circle: that of journalists, who, driven more by the need to make a living than philosophical or literary concerns, have tackled in their journalistic texts so 'high' a matter as death. More specifically, we will attempt to record and study a historical source hitherto neglected in Greek historiography, though, as preliminary findings have shown, an exceptionally interesting and useful one in many respects: the obituary. We will focus on texts concerning Greek and European actors, published in journals and the daily press from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup>. What kind of biographical details can we draw from them? How accurate are they? And, more generally, how far can the documented details of death give new life to the area of theatre historiography concerned with biographical research?

By 'obituary' we mainly mean published, printed texts of varying length that offer a brief panorama of what the writer considers the most

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important details of the deceased's life and works. The first modern obituaries or death announcements accompanied by brief biographical notes appeared in 1731, in the London *Gentleman's Magazine*. A few decades later, the editor of *The Times*, John Delane, revived the paper's permanent obituary column, transforming it from simple announcements of deaths to 'the first drafts of history'.<sup>1</sup> Obituaries of baronets, members of the House of Commons and representatives of the scientific and literary fields were published in the columns of the paper in an attempt to highlight individual contribution to the public sphere as a whole: the obituary is 'the first step towards posthumous memory,' writes Bridget Fowler, noting that 'it is not just a *store* of value, it is a *measure* of value [...] it illuminates the social reality of dominance and distinction, whilst only rarely shedding light on the world of subordination'.<sup>2</sup>

Roughly the same path was followed in Greece. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century daily press might not have had a permanent obituary column, but the death of an important public figure was enough to fill the front pages with extensive posthumous biographies. The literary journals or annual almanacs, on the contrary, had permanent obituary columns that not only provided the biographies of scientists, scholars, national benefactors and wealthy Greeks of the diaspora, but above all praised them effusively for their personal merits and intellectual gifts, and for the generosity with which they placed their mite or their knowledge at the service of the social and economic life of the homeland. 'There is no deceased person among us, [...] of whom at least a two-column obituary is not written [...], mixed up with such praises that even the pallid greenish cheeks of the extolled dead sometimes blush red with shame,' as Konstantinos Skokos scathingly commented, referring to the ever-expanding phenomenon of obituary-publishing in the greek press.<sup>3</sup> Despite the publisher's concern, however, with the coming of the 20<sup>th</sup> century permanent obituary columns began to disappear, vanishing almost completely from literary journals in the first quarter of the century.

This was not the case in other countries. Journals such as *The New Yorker* and *The Economist* continued to include obituaries in their pages,

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1 Fowler (2007: 4-6).

2 Fowler (2007: 8).

3 Skokos (1886: 134).

while specialised editors (the “obits”, as they called) assumed the morbid duty. The Anglo-Saxon literature is currently being enriched by scientific articles and monographs that treat obituaries not only as evidence of post-humous fame but, above all, as a form of cultural expression.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in-depth study of obituaries shows that they contribute, in a wider framework, to the understanding of sociopolitical issues, and, in a narrower one, offer important historical information on people and events for which no other sources may be available. The obituaries of major protagonists of Greek theatre such as Pantelis Soutsas and Constantinos Sayor, or European stars such as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse, are simply the culmination of the articles on their lives and works published throughout their theatrical careers. This, however, is not true of people on whose theatrical works and days we have little information, either because their career was cut short or because historiographical research has classed them as ‘average’. The obituaries, albeit brief, of once-important but now-forgotten actors, such as Ioanna Nikiphorou, who died of typhus in October 1886, or Stella Tsilivikou, the ‘Blind Girl in *The Two Orphans*’, who died suddenly in January 1891, shed light on unknown aspects of their theatrical careers and indeed their lives as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes strictly informative, in accordance with the rules of journalism, and sometimes more personal and subjective, obituaries offer an impressionistic, often eventful biographical approach to the life and works of the deceased, sprinkled with melodramatic narrative tones, anecdotes and sometimes phrases supposedly spoken by the deceased. For example, through the retelling of an amusing incident readers are informed how the pseudonym Sayor was derived from the surname Platanopoulos, or what Duse’s dying words were.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of each writer’s chosen style, the obituaries follow the same general pattern: announcement and cause of death, family status, personal and intellectual gifts of the deceased. An indicative example is the obituary of Pantelis Soutsas, occupying several columns in the Syros newspaper *Pherecydis* in May 1875. From the very first lines, the writer informs

4 See, e.g., Fox (1980), Maybury (1995: 27-37), Marks & Piggee (1998: 37-57), Hume (2000), Fowler (2005: 53-67), Jason (2007: 325-346).

5 [Anonymous] (1886: 2)·[Anonymous] (1891: 3).

6 [Anonymous] (1910: 284)· [Laskaris] (1924: 13).

the reader that the ‘patriarch of the stage’ died in Patras from Anthrax (an infection caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*) continuing with an extensive biography, deliberately avoiding – another common characteristic of obituaries – the use of dates. Thus, there may be no reference to Soutsas’s participation in the “National Theatre” company of Grigorios Kambouroglou in 1856-58, or to the fact that he was co-leader of a theatre company with Dionysios Tavoularis in 1867, but it is stressed how much he ‘longed for the return of the ancient days’ and how he worked ‘tirelessly [...] for the perfection of drama and comedy, writing, correcting, paraphrasing, exercising, teaching’. The author also refers to Soutsas’s work as a publisher and journalist: ‘Who does not recall the articles in *Traboukos*, full of jocular humour and Attic salt, who does not recall his satirical and lyrical poems?’ And all this, while ‘ignoring privations, dangers, mockers’, in the midst of suffering and premature deaths, like that of his 10-year-old son, which devastated him and his wife, the actor Polyxeni Soutsas. A craftsman of the theatre, full of virtue: ‘kind, good-natured, [...], honest, wise, [...] but also a good husband, a loving father, an upright citizen’.

These merits are not only listed to secure the actor’s legacy, but mainly because the obituarist wishes to reverse the poor public view of the acting profession: ‘we believe [...] that because the stage is scorned, suitable persons do not appear on it so that they should not be scorned too, rather than that the stage is scorned because it is joined by people most of whom are unworthy of esteem. The proof is that many to date have appeared on stage, sacrificing their good standing, in order to eliminate the predominant view of defamation of the individual for the sake of the acting profession’. Soutsas is one of the most striking examples of this, having ‘made sacrifices and been sacrificed for the glory of the Greek stage’.<sup>7</sup>

The same sociological aim is shared by the obituarists of Ioanna Nikiphorou and Stella Tsilivikou, whose real name, we are informed, was Stella Nikolaou. Seeking to disprove the then-prevalent view that women in the acting profession had loose morals, they particularly stressed their personal virtues, the exemplary way they raised their children, and, above

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7 Zalouchos (1875:1-2). The obituary is anonymous but recently Iro Katsiotti identified the writer of the text with Dimitrio Zalouchos, see, Iro Katsiotti, “Dimitrios Zalouchos; A Devotee of Pantelis Soutsas”.

all, the fact that they were among the educated actresses of their generation; indeed, Tsilivikou, together with her sister Eleni, later Kotopouli, was a graduate of the Arsakeion Girls' School.<sup>8</sup> The obituarists also do not omit the fact that social prejudices meant that actors were poorly paid. Leonidas Kapellos and Ioannis Kyriakos, due to 'general disdain and State negligence' died penniless and were buried at public expense, while Athansios Sisyphos, 'now blind, is living in extreme poverty in Athens,' as the Syros writer informs us.<sup>9</sup> All the above confirm what is reported in the obituary of Sotirios Kartesios in 1869, who in his final years, 'in the midst of patient poverty... gained the food and shelter of his unfortunate orphans' by teaching drawing in primary schools and at the Chatzikostas Orphanage.<sup>10</sup>

With the passing decades, as acting ceased to be synonymous with simple work, chiefly suited to feckless wastrels, and was transformed into a respectable profession, decently paid and glamorous in the eyes of the more progressive Greek intellectual circles, such approaches and comments become rarer, while obituarists limit themselves to recording purely biographical data. Nevertheless, the wealth of biographical information should be treated, if not with suspicion, then with a healthy scientific and historiographical scepticism, as it usually needs to be checked against other contemporary sources. The information that Michael Arniotakis, while still a law student and working as a court secretary, made his first appearance on stage in the company of Pantelis Soutsas in 1866, playing Aepytus in *Merope* by Dimitrios Vernardakis, is borne out by press publications.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, there is no evidence confirming that Demosthenes Alexiades made his theatrical debut in Constantinople in the summer of 1862 with Pantelis Soutsas's company, playing the part of G ronte in Moli re's *Le M decin malgré lui*.<sup>12</sup>

In other cases, the biographical information published is deliberately vague and misleading, as with the university professor and former actor Theodoros Orphanidis. In his brief obituary in the *Hemerologion tis Hestias*, the author refers only to his botanical studies in Paris, with a scholarship from

8 [Anonymous] (1886: 2)-[Anonymous] (1891: 2).

9 Zalouchos (1875:1).

10 [Anonymous] (1896:2-3).

11 Laskaris (1910: 1). See Hadjipantazis (2012: 45).

12 [Anonymous] (1916:2). See Hadjipantazis (2012: 28).

the government of Ioannis Kolettis, and only touches upon his publication of the *Toxotis* satirical newspaper and his authorship of lyrical poems and plays.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the eminent professor of the National Museum started out as an actor with the company of Athanasios Skontzopoulos and the ‘Company of the Athens Theatre’ is carefully suppressed, as is the information that he was one of the ringleaders of the anti-Bavarian movement.<sup>14</sup> The braver editor of the *Asty* journal placed Orphanidis among the first young intellectuals who ‘did not scorn to go on stage, amateurs of the theatre’, adding that ‘he belonged to the active section of society, sometimes giving the signal for action himself,’ though avoiding any clearer allusion to his anti-dynastic struggles.<sup>15</sup> Finally, he too mentions the state scholarship, without stating the object of study. Two obituaries, two different biographical approaches, both far from the truth. The government of Ioannis Kolettis had indeed awarded the young Orphanidis a scholarship to go to France in March 1844, but it was to study acting rather than Botany. Most importantly, the ulterior motive for this was not due to any ‘appreciation’ of his academic and intellectual abilities, as the obituarists hint; it was in order to tactfully remove one of the most active troublemakers in Greek sociopolitical life. It thus becomes obvious that each journalist not only filters information through his own subjective judgement, but also chooses very carefully what he will ultimately present to the reading public. Obituary is closely interwoven with eulogy, so anything that might blacken the shining name of the subject is suppressed or simply concealed.

One of the basic elements of the obituary is the reference to the acting talent of the deceased and the listing of their roles. Pantelis Soutsas, for instance, managed to play with equal success Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Shakespeare’s *Othello*, or the historical Voutsaras in Dimitrios Vernardakis’s *Maria Doxapatri*. ‘He was ambidextrous,’ noted Demosthenes Alexiades in his funeral speech,<sup>16</sup> masterfully capable of provoking ‘laughter as well as tears. The interest of empathy, as well as rage,’ as the editor of *Pherecydis* went on to explain.<sup>17</sup>

13 [Anonymous] (1887: 254-255).

14 See Orphanidis’ participation in the first theatrical attempts in Athens and his anti-defensive action Hadjipantazis (2002: 104, 308-309).

15 [Anonymous] (1887: 7).

16 Alexiadis (1875: 2).

17 Zalouchos (1875: 2).

As time went by, lengthy biographies were curtailed, giving way to information on the art of acting. Nikolaos Laskaris provided no biographical information in his obituary of Constantinos Saylor, wrongly stating that ‘no-one knows where and when he was born, where and when he first appeared on stage,’ and limiting himself to a crescendo of praise for his acting. Saylor managed to play both comic and tragic roles with equal success, because, ‘like all true actors, he is ambidextrous’; however, ‘he was unmatched in farce and light comedy’.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the anonymous obituarist of the journal *O Kallitechnis* briefly informs the reader that Saylor first appeared in popular theatres in his birthplace, Smyrna, and that he became known to the Athenian public from his performances at the Neapolis Theatre and the Nea Skini. This obituarist, too, gives a lengthy description of the actor’s comic gifts, stressing that even in inferior plays, ‘he found a way [...], to add grace and naturalism’.<sup>19</sup>

Laskaris’s obituaries on the two great stars of European theatre take a similar approach: ‘No other actress rendered [...] more naturally than Sarah all the compound expressions of human strength,’ and no other managed to move her audience with ‘the naturalism of her performance [...] the evocative expressiveness of her face and the charm of her voice’ as much as Eleonora Duse, he wrote with unfeigned admiration.<sup>20</sup> The example of the obituaries of Bernhardt and Duse, in 1923 and 1924 respectively, was followed in 1925 by the obituarists of a shooting star of the theatrical firmament, Eimarmeni Xanthaki. One of the two high priestesses of Konstantinos Christomanos’s Nea Skini, forgotten by the theatre-going public following her decision to temporarily abandon the stage in order to care for her family, she lived out of the spotlight for years, especially once she ‘contracted pathological religious mania and was shut in a sanatorium’.<sup>21</sup> This is the only piece of biographical information provided, as Xanthaki’s obituaries function more as a starting-point for theatrical reminiscences and acting references: ‘she knew how to charm and conquer, but with such naturalism that no trace of pretence, no trace of art, appeared in her playing,’ wrote the first obituarist, and the second added: ‘Her acting belonged to the

18 Laskaris(1910: 122-123).

19 [Anonymous] (1910: 284-285).

20 Laskaris (1923: 6-7)· Laskaris (1924: 13-14).

21 S. (1925: 4).

“*école sombre*” of the theatrical art, in which internalisation dominates and externalisation is restrained’.<sup>22</sup> ‘Naturalness’ (*φυσικότητα*), ‘grace’ (*χάρη*), emotional expression, terms which the historian would expect to find in texts on acting theory or at least in an exhaustive theatre review, now stand alone at the centre of obituaries, a reminder not only of the acting prowess of the deceased but also of the way in which the concept of the natural and naturalism is received and understood.

The study of this special category of journalism shows that obituaries are something more than strictly encyclopaedic entries, listing details of the subject’s life and work. Obituary is a hybrid genre in which praise coexists with selective information and emotion with objectivity, reflecting the social, intellectual and general cultural values of every age.<sup>23</sup> The journalists who have closely followed the actors’ stage careers for years become, in the end, far more than their simple biographers; they become authors of funerary elegies, in which the term ‘death’ recurs not as a conjuration of a *fait accompli* but as the starting-point for the description of an art as ephemeral as the players themselves.

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22 S. (1925: 4)· Mía (1925: 4).

23 Fernández (2006: 104).



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### Περίληψη

Ένα από τα βασικότερα βιβλιογραφικά και ιστοριογραφικά προβλήματα ενός μελετητή της ιστορίας του νεοελληνικού θεάτρου, ιδίως των πρώτων χρόνων της εδραίωσής του- είναι οι ελλειπείς ως ανύπαρκτες πληροφορίες που αφορούν τη ζωή και το θεατρικό/σκηνικό έργο ηθοποιών του 19ου αιώνα. Άρθρα ή κριτικές που δημοσιεύτηκαν κατά τη διάρκεια της ζωής του προς μελέτη ηθοποιού, σπάνιες συνεντεύξεις του, έμμεσες πληροφορίες από βιογραφίες ή αυτοβιογραφίες προσώπων που σχετίστηκαν επαγγελματικά, αρχεία θιάσων, και αγγελτήρια θανάτου είναι κάποιες από τις πηγές που έχει στα χέρια του ο μελετητής προκειμένου να συγκροτήσει έστω και ένα υποτυπώδες «σχεδιάσμα» βιογραφίας. Σε όλες τις παραπάνω πηγές θα πρέπει να προσθέσουμε ακόμα μια, αρκετά μακάβρια αλλά παρ' όλα αυτά ιδιαίτερος χρήσιμη πηγή: την νεκρολογία. Στόχος της παρούσας ανακοίνωσης είναι μια πρώτη συστηματική παρουσίαση αυτής της παραγνωρισμένης ως σήμερα ιστορικής πηγής και η προσπάθεια αναγωγής της σε ιστορικό τεκμήριο γύρω από τη ζωή και το έργο των προσώπων της ελληνικής θεατρικής ιστορίας.

**Key Words:** Obituary, Death, Actor's biography, Theatre history, Press, 19<sup>th</sup> century