

The Reception of Greek Tragedy from 500 to 323 BC

Martin Revermann

When Aeschylus, one of the earlier Greek tragic playwrights and the oldest among the three who would achieve canonical status, died in or around 456 BC, he was not buried in Athens, his home-city in which he had spent all but the last couple of years of his life and where his plays were well known and regularly performed. He died in Sicily, in the city of Gela, as a guest at the court of the local tyrant Hieron, still writing and producing plays. Here, according to his (anonymous) biographer, he was not only sumptuously buried, but his tomb became a site of pilgrimage for theater professionals who “would conduct sacrifices and perform his plays.”¹ At the same time, the citizens of his home-town Athens, the biographer continues, passed a decree in the assembly that anyone who wished to reperform an Aeschylean play should be granted a chorus (the necessary prerequisite for public and competitive theater performance). These strongly favorable and clearly exceptional collective responses, in two rather distinct parts of the Greek cultural continuum, provide ample testimony to the impact Aeschylus had been making on his contemporaries and are strong markers of his incipient iconization and canonization, not just in Athens, but in Greece as a whole. They also bring home three key points about the process of reception itself. First, reception is not only a diachronic process that delineates “after the fact” (in this case, the death of the artist) but also a synchronic cultural dynamic between an artist and his or her contemporaries. After all, Aeschylus had been famous enough during his lifetime to receive a most favorable welcome from those in power far away from his own home-city. Secondly, reception is a complex cultural phenomenon which manifests itself in many forms and media beyond the literary and performative, thereby generating new forms of symbolic interaction (in this particular case, religious practice and some kind of institutionalized reperformance). But other modes of reception could, for instance, include political rhetoric or the visual arts. And, thirdly, reception processes are often both

local and trans-local (or “international”) phenomena, creating cultural geographies in their own right and with their own dynamics. As an ongoing negotiation over cultural value, reception therefore provides significant insights into both the received and the recipient, whose “receptivity” may well change over time in nature, focus, or intensity.

The reception of Greek tragedy within the time period under scrutiny in this chapter must be considered a model case of the complexities just outlined. This is not only because the nearly two centuries from the artistic beginnings of the young Aeschylus to the year in which Alexander the Great died (with the philosopher Aristotle following a year later) saw tragedy—a young art form created in Athens during the sixth century which integrated and transformed long-existing Ionian and Doric traditions of epic, and especially choral, performance to form an entirely novel polyphony of artistic expression—developing rapidly from an (instant?) local success into a major cultural force with pan-Hellenic appeal. By the end of the fourth century, there are dramatic performances in theaters, some of them seating far more than 10 000 people, all over the Greek world and beyond (as far away as modern Afghanistan);² people speaking in court liberally quote from or allude to tragedy, assuming that their large and socially diverse audiences will pick this up and respond favorably; tragedy’s rival sibling, comedy, has become much less keen on parodying tragic motifs and techniques, instead using them for a more refined and less aggressive sense of humor; well-paid star actors are highly mobile celebrities, while the majority of tragic playwrights no longer hail from Athens but from all over Greece (even if Athens retains the role as the epicenter of the art); tragedy has become not one but *the* vehicle for telling traditional tales (replacing, though certainly not obliterating, epic poetry), with its stories and performances inspiring visual artists (especially in Southern Italy and Sicily); and some of the most celebrated intellectuals of the period engage with tragedy as an important object of reflection.

This is not the place for a more detailed account of this remarkable (and remarkably successful) 200-year-long cultural evolution. Instead I will group my narrative around four landmark items of reception while attempting to situate these individual landmarks within the wider cultural landscape.

Aristophanes’ *Frogs*

The first of these, Aristophanes’ comedy *Frogs*, was first performed in early 405 and is a response to a traumatic experience, the death of Euripides a few months prior in 406.³ The fact that a comedy should extensively interact with tragedy is not surprising but rather an important feature of the genre: there is evidence to suggest that as early as the beginning of the fifth century already, in the Sicilian (!) comedies of Epicharmus, Aeschylus’ tragic diction was being lampooned.⁴ Athenian comedy too was deeply invested in exploiting tragedy, its grand and brilliant rival,

for its own purposes, in a quite aggressive and parasitical way. This applies in particular to Aristophanes, who appears to have been very interested in paratragedy, perhaps exceptionally so.⁵

Yet, even by the standard of this metric, *Frogs* is unusual, both in terms of the extent and the depth of comedy's engagement with tragedy. Dionysus, the god of theater, and more generally of liminality and transgression, crosses the ultimate boundary, that which separates the living from the dead, in order to resurrect Euripides, with whose work he is infatuated. He is in search of a "decent poet" (*poiêtês dexios*: *Frogs* 71) in order to save the city of Athens in its constant state of military crisis and threat of defeat by Sparta (during the events which modern historians refer to collectively as the Peloponnesian War). While *Frogs* works on, and fuses, political and religious levels (especially by means of the main chorus of Eleusinian initiates), it is the (meta)poetic dimension that pervades the play from start to finish. This fact in itself is reason to pause: in late fifth-century Athens we are evidently dealing with a culture in which large mass audiences (at least 7000, if not far more, spectators at that point in time) are willing and able to engage with a comedy that is deeply concerned with the reception of tragedy. Even more than that, a comic playwright could enter a play like *Frogs* in the competition for the much-coveted first prize at one of the Athenian dramatic festivals—and win. From ancient scholars we indeed have the information that *Frogs* won first prize at the Lenaea festival in early 405, and that it was even granted the extraordinary privilege of competitive reperformance, probably at the Lenaea a year later.⁶ Vase evidence strongly suggests the reperformance of *Frogs* (and another heavily paratragic comedy by Aristophanes, the *Women at the Thesmophoria*) in Southern Italy in the fourth century,⁷ which indicates that the cultural interest and theatrical competence required from the audience by such works of art were far from being an exclusively Athenian phenomenon.

The core of the comedy, its monumental "debate" (*agôn*) between the characters "Aeschylus" and "Euripides," which spans almost half of the entire play, is an entertaining contest over poetic value, blending the light and the serious to form a hilarious mix. "Euripides," as obnoxious when dead as he (in Aristophanes' presentation) had been when alive, instantly challenges the position of "Aeschylus" as prime tragic poet in the underworld. Much of the ensuing contest between the two tragic poets revolves around matters of craft (*technê*), i.e., formal skills of diction, versification, or character construction, with either one quoting or referring to their own poetry or attacking that of the opponent. Approaching the play from the vantage point of Reception Studies, we may justly wonder how many among the large and socially diverse first audience of *Frogs* in Athens were able to pick up the intricacies that were played out in front of them. Aristophanes in fact anticipated the threat of losing his audience, since he has the chorus address the issue of audience competence head-on about half-way through the *agôn* (1109–1118). By having the chorus praise the audience in this context as well-trained, competent, wise, and sophisticated, Aristophanes is "cheer-leading" them on,

flattering them and boosting their collective self-esteem. The reality must have been complex and variable, with different audience members operating at different levels of competence.⁸ Because they operated in competitive contexts, comic playwrights had to be adept at creating plays that were simple *and* complex at the same time, appealing to all levels of taste and sophistication without losing or alienating any segment of playgoers. The huge success of *Frogs* makes it clear that the right balance had been struck. And it demonstrates just how deeply invested in tragedy the Athenian mass audiences of the late fifth century really were.

Frogs marks an important cesura in the history of tragedy reception (as far as we are able to reconstruct it). Not only was it prompted, as cultural responses often are, by a traumatic experience, in this case, the death of Euripides (to whom the play, despite its aggressive humor, is of course a homage). What is more remarkable is the level of self-awareness with which Aristophanes, and by implication his mass audiences, reflects on, rationalizes, and even celebrates this very cesura. The era of “classical” tragedy is now felt to be over: only Iophon, Sophocles’ son, might be able to carry on the torch, but the jury on him is still out (*Frogs* 72–97). The triad of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as the tragic classics is now canonical already, and one feels that it had been for some time, even while two of those three were still alive. Perhaps most importantly, tragedy is about more than craft. In Dionysus’ view, the decisive criterion for picking the winner is an ethical one, namely a tragedian’s power to save the *polis* (*Frogs* 1418–1421). This is why “Aeschylus” is preferred in the end (bearing in mind, of course, that the ultimate savior of the city is Aristophanic comedy: after all, it takes comedy to bring back “Aeschylus” in the first place). Tragedy, therefore, is more than an art form: it is first and foremost a moral institution.

Lycurgus’ *Against Leocrates*

The use of tragedy as a moral institution is also at the core of the second major item I wish to highlight, Lycurgus’ speech *Against Leocrates* which was held in the year 330, i.e., towards the end of the period under scrutiny.⁹ From 338 onwards, Lycurgus was the leading Athenian politician in the last phase of a democratic mode of government before the Macedonian take-over in 322, so much so that historians refer to the city of this period as “Lycurgan Athens.” *Against Leocrates* is the only preserved speech by Lycurgus. It is targeted against an individual who had left Athens after the battle of Chaironeia in 338, in which Philip II of Macedon decisively defeated an alliance of city-states which included Thebes and Athens. Leocrates returned to his home-city several years later, only to be accused of treachery against his homeland in a kind of legal charge (the *eisangelia*) which meant capital punishment in the case of a conviction (whether or not Leocrates was in fact convicted we do not know, nor do we possess the speech in which he defended himself). This rather disproportionate relationship between alleged

crime and sought-for penalty, which was noted in antiquity already, in conjunction with the harshly moralistic tone of the speech as a whole earned Lycurgus the unenviable title of “Athenian grand-inquisitor” (coined by Beloch in the late nineteenth century¹⁰).

From the viewpoint of tragedy reception, Lycurgus’ discursive style, in particular, his noticeable penchant for digressions involving iconic poets and poetry, make this “textbook in civic virtue”¹¹ an important document for gauging the value of various cultural commodities not just with a member of the Athenian ruling elite (Lycurgus’ background) but also the socially stratified and comparatively large court audiences of citizen-jurors.¹² In other words, the general communicative situation is rather similar to that of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. The fact that a play by Euripides, the *Erechtheus*, features prominently in Lycurgus’ speech and argumentative strategy therefore has to be of significance when assessing the standing of tragedy, and of Euripides in particular, in the second half of the fourth century: (Euripidean) tragedy clearly is a known entity with the popular courts and, by implication, the Athenians at large. More than that, it is cultural and political capital. While Lycurgus resorts to other pieces of poetry—Homer, the Spartan (!) poet Tyrtaeus and funeral epigrams—the appropriation of the Euripidean play is the most extensive one. From it, Lycurgus quotes a continuous chunk of 55 iambic trimeters, all spoken by Erechtheus’ wife Praxagora to justify to her (hesitant?) husband Erechtheus the necessity of sacrificing one of their three daughters in order to defend the city of Athens from being taken over by the Thracian invader Eumolpus.¹³ For Lycurgus, the monologue illustrates what patriotism for the city of Athens is capable of doing, and how miserable by comparison Leocrates’ “betrayal” of the city is. A fairly theatrical in-court delivery of these lines by Lycurgus is likely: Athenian court speeches, with their customary inserts of witness testimony and quotations of laws and decrees, are highly theatrical and performance-oriented to begin with.¹⁴ It is surely significant that Lycurgus chose to deliver this, and all other poetry in his speech, himself, rather than leave the recitation to a clerk as would often happen.¹⁵ While this choice meant that he invested some of his own speech time (which was limited and monitored by a water clock), it offered the decisive advantage of helping to authenticate his message.

Most interesting is the fact that Lycurgus presents Euripides as a steadfast patriot whose work sought to instill love for the homeland in his audience (100):

This is why one is justified in praising Euripides because he, while being a good poet (*agathos poiêtês*) in the other aspects, also chose to dramatize this particular story (*mythos*). For he thought that the actions of those people would be the most beautiful example for the citizens, who by watching and observing those actions could get used in their hearts (*sunethizesthai tais psychais*) to loving their homeland.

This staunchly conservative Euripides who habituates his viewers to “true patriot love” is a far cry from the unruly “Euripides” in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, who is at best

an ethically ambiguous and at worst a morally depraving artist. It is not easy to try to explain this shift in perception from trouble-maker to icon of the conservatives except, perhaps, by invoking genre- and author-specific manipulative agendas as well as the time gap of 75 years: that over time once controversial figures morph into mainstream icons is certainly an often-encountered phenomenon of cultural history across centuries and geographies. One might also wish to argue that Euripidean tragedy is often intrinsically and provocatively bi-polar, and that it thrives on being both innovative (hence potentially offensive) and traditional at the same time. In addition, the Euripidean *Erechtheus* (first performed in the late 420s or the 410s) was surely an exceptional play by the standards of the genre. It was one of the apparently extremely few tragedies written in the fifth century that was set in Athens, on its acropolis even, and dramatized an Athenian myth, while usually Attic tragedy tends to find and play out its horrors in other Greek locales (often Thebes).¹⁶

It is, finally, of interest to note that in his speech Lycurgus suppresses a personal link which he had with Euripides' play and which may also have compelled him to use it in this context. The *Erechtheus* concluded, among other things, by specifying the cult of Athena Polias, Poseidon, and Erechtheus, all of which were conducted by priests and priestesses from the *genos* (= noble clan) of the Eteobutadai.¹⁷ Lycurgus in fact hailed from this *genos* and became its most famous member. When extensively quoting Praxithea, he therefore impersonated not just a tragic character but in fact an ancient kinswoman of his. Explicitly highlighting his illustrious pedigree in front of the citizen jurors was hardly an advisable strategy in a speech which aimed to be patriotically inclusive. Yet Lycurgus and his family must have had a special personal rapport with this particular play, as the *Erechtheus* dealt with the early history of his own aristocratic family in particular, in addition to detailing that of Athens in general.

Lycurgus' speech is strongly anti-Macedonian: after all, Leocrates had left Athens after its decisive defeat by the Macedonian king Philip II. Euripides, however, had spent his last years at the Macedonian court, wrote one play (the *Archelaus*), in celebration of the mythical ancestors of the Macedonian royal house, and died in the Macedonian capital Pella! Whether or not Lycurgus was aware of this profound irony is impossible to say (although I suspect that at least some of his listeners did pick it up). Macedon and its rulers, to be sure, play a crucial role as a catalyst in the dissemination of Greek tragedy to the very edges of their vast empire.¹⁸ Tragedy, we know from papyrus finds and theater archeology, was performed in places as distant as Ai Khanoum in Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), and became one of the key items to define Greekness in an increasingly internationalized and inter-connected world. The Macedonian rulers were particularly anxious to latch onto Greek tragedy in order to dispel doubts, regularly activated by their opponents from the mainland, about their own Greekness. Identity formation and desire to belong are extremely strong forces in reception history *tout court*. Greek tragedy in particular could serve as an ideal, highly respectable,

and suitably malleable vehicle here, providing an Athenian like Lycurgus and his fellow-citizens with a sense of Athenianness while helping others like the Macedonian ruling elite to define Greekness and assert it as their own.

Finally, the monolithic use in the speech of Euripides as a cultural icon beyond reproach before a popular court strongly suggests that, in the fourth century, of the three canonical tragedians, it is Euripides, and not Aeschylus or Sophocles, who enjoyed the greatest popularity and respect. This impression is very much corroborated by other evidence: the (quite frequent) use of tragedy in other orators, who similarly show a strong preference for Euripides;¹⁹ the strong interest of fourth-century comedy in Euripides, not least in Menander whose dramaturgy is deeply influenced by (Euripidean) tragedy; the fourth-century reperformances of fifth-century tragedies, which at the City Dionysia in Athens started in 386 BC and which suggest that in terms of wide popularity Euripides was second to none;²⁰ and tragedy-related vase paintings, mostly from Southern Italy and Sicily, many of which are certainly or plausibly inspired by Euripides. It is the last type of evidence that, taken as a whole, will serve as my third key item.

Vase Paintings

This discussion, however, needs to be prefaced by a major disclaimer. While the topic of theater-related art of the fifth and fourth century, especially as far as tragedy-related vase paintings are concerned, has been a major area of productive and stimulating research over the past 20 years, it is also a notoriously difficult and multi-faceted one. Here more than elsewhere, then, my discussion is bound to be reductionist and needs to be supplemented by other publications (see the items mentioned under “Guide to Further Reading,” which also provide rich illustration). The most serious challenge is a methodological one: by which cues does the ancient artifact *signal* its relation to tragedy, and to what aspect of it (its narratives and/or its performative instantiation)? And might there be artifacts which are inspired by, or in some other way related to, tragedy but which do not signal this fact at all, possibly because the broader material context in which the artifact was situated—a dedicatory monument or a sanctuary, for instance—was perfectly sufficient to signal this link with tragedy instead (in which case, the connection would be lost on the modern viewer)? There is a stark contrast here with artifacts related to comedy, which tend to signal that relationship quite overtly (by way of masks, costumes, stages, labels, sometimes even text which would seem to be part of the performance script). A second major challenge is the geographical distribution: some tragedy-related art, including vase paintings, comes from Athens (dating from the fifth and fourth century), whereas there is also a significant amount of evidence, almost exclusively vase paintings and from the fourth century BC, from Western Greece, i.e. Southern Italy and Sicily (where Greeks had settled since the eighth century BC). Those two challenges are, of course, inter-connected

in that the problem of “cues” (challenge 1) will greatly affect the number of artifacts considered to be theater-related from Athens and Western Greece (challenge 2). To illustrate this point: the incisive and wide-ranging analysis by Csapo (2010) is particularly interested in artifacts that show signs of theatrical “realism,” i.e., attempts to represent performers as performers (instead of mythological heroes) and plays as plays (instead of mythological narratives). For Athens, this criterion yields four vase paintings (all from the fifth century), and the whole corpus of Attic “theater-realistic” artwork related to tragedy *and* comedy consists of 26 vase paintings and eight reliefs.²¹ Using looser criteria, however, others have considered as many as 140 Attic vase paintings to be tragedy-related. For Western Greece, the total number of tragedy-related vase paintings has been estimated to be around four hundred, again using looser criteria than theater “realism,” such as choice of topic, gestures, blocking, or a sense of theatricality.²²

Bearing these significant challenges in mind, roughly the following big picture emerges. The Attic evidence shows a clear preference for depicting tragic choruses, whereas that from Western Greece shows an equally clear preference for actors. The media chosen to depict tragedy—commemorative reliefs, symposium vessels, and funeral vessels (the last two categories not being mutually exclusive)—tend to be expensive and grand, designed for display of status, wealth, and connoisseurship, by contrast with much of the comedy-related evidence. Specific interest in the individual actor, as opposed to the choral collective, seems to be a characteristic of the fourth century, especially in Western Greek art. And among those vase paintings that can, with various degrees of plausibility, be considered to be inspired by specific tragedies—in the standard work for this “matching approach,” Taplin’s *Pots and Plays* (2007), 109 vases are being discussed—the clear majority have a connection with Euripides.²³

What the vases are able to tell us, their modern interpreters, is very much contingent on the kind of questions that we put to them. For instance, even the comedy-related vases, which tend to be much more overtly theatrical than the tragedy-related ones, yield very little help in reconstructing actual staging practices in fifth- or fourth-century theaters. Yet they give us an excellent general idea of costumes and, to a slightly lesser extent, gestures. Theater-related vase paintings also provide indispensable evidence for a figure who was central to dramatic performance but who is only rarely mentioned in (comic) texts, the *aulos* player.²⁴ But it is, rather fortunately, for questions formulated from the viewpoint of Reception Studies that this kind of evidence yields some very interesting and significant insights. The first such question is “Why tragedy-related artifacts to begin with?” in other words, the sheer existence of this type of evidence. Clearly, there is some widely-felt need for pictorial responses to the experience, through performance and possibly reading, of tragedy. This re-mediation, from ephemeral performative events in a large public space to fixed pictorial representation in a variety of public, semi-public or private spaces (homes, symposium rooms, streets, funeral sites), is one further indicator of the widespread cultural presence and impact made by tragedy that is similarly suggested by the textual evidence discussed in this chapter.

Even more interesting, however, are the answers to other questions: “What do theater-related artifacts do, and for whom? Who benefits from them, and in what ways?” This leads directly to issues of class and the social stratification of reception. Here the visual evidence provides different and more nuanced answers than the textual evidence (which is largely addressed to large audiences who are treated as socially undifferentiated “black boxes”). The interest in choruses that can be observed in Attic art, together with the choice of medium (relief on a monument and expensive symposium vessels), strongly points to the social stratum of the *chorêgoi*, the (very) wealthy sponsors of dramatic as well as dithyrambic productions.²⁵ Their return on investment was social capital: they received the prize, a tripod, for the victorious production, which was of little monetary but high symbolic value. It could, and would, be propped up, for all to see, on monuments, which in turn were adorned with choral reliefs, some of which have come down to us. The wealthy individual sponsors the choral collective and in return gets the opportunity to display this largesse to the public in exceptional and eye-catching ways (note, however, that the choregic monuments celebrating victory in the dithyrambic competition were grander than those celebrating success in the competition of tragedies). Similarly, the high-end symposium vessels would signal, for few to see, their owners’ social status and cultural interests to their peers who had access to the socially exclusive symposium. This choregic art, then, served the need of social differentiation of the moneyed Athenian elite, and tragedy, both as performed and as represented, was a fundamental part of these dynamics.

The situation in Western Greece appears to be similar while at the same time suggesting intriguing differences. Here there is, so far, no known public choregic art (although we do know that a choregic system of some sort existed, in at least one place in Sicily).²⁶ Instead, there is a large number of vase paintings on vessels for use at the symposium or funerals or both, and a great interest in actors and individual scenes, as opposed to choruses. This shift can plausibly be related, at least in part, to the rise of the actor that can be observed in the fourth century in general. But especially in the symposium context, it also provides different modes of identification and interaction for the owners and viewers of these vessels. Symposia were, among other things, sites for social competition among the elite and could take on an agonistic character with games, speech-making on a set topic, and so forth. Within this competitive matrix, tragedy-related vases could conveniently function as cues for theater-related games: Who knows the scene depicted? Who can quote from it? What did other playwrights do with the same scene? And apart from these possibilities, the sheer existence of such a vase painting in the household would signal its owner’s connoisseurship and socio-cultural prestige. This also applies to the (public or semi-public/semi-private) funeral context, regardless of whether the vases would also function as cues for the funeral orator, as has been suggested.

In sum, tragedy-related art strongly suggests that tragedy had a distinct appeal to the elite, some of whom, at least in Athens, were also materially invested in

tragic performance as *chorêgoi*. The re-mediation from ephemeral performance into durable material artifact gave the tragic experience a fixity and portability which could be exploited for gain in cultural capital in private, public, or semi-public/semi-private social contexts. The challenge was that tragedy in performance functioned as a mass medium, performed to very large and, in social terms, broadly stratified audiences. Its consumption in performance was, by the standards of the fifth and fourth century BC, egalitarian (regardless of whether or not women were allowed to attend). Material art, on the contrary, gave the elite a prime opportunity for social extension on their terms: it enabled them to reconfigure tragedy as something exclusively theirs, to be displayed to people of their choice and in social contexts they controlled, either completely or to a considerable extent. As the theater business expanded more and more during the fourth century, the cultural anxiety of the elite over ownership of the theatrical experience, especially that of tragedy, increased. It seems plausible to assume that in particular the symposium and/or funeral vessels from fourth-century Western Greece are also the means by which the elite not only extended but aimed to *preserve* ownership over the highly valued cultural commodity, tragedy, in an age when it was increasingly subject to mass consumption. This observation is also of some significance when discussing the fourth and final key item of reception on which I would like to focus, the *Poetics* by Aristotle.²⁷

Aristotle's *Poetics*

Aristotle's *Poetics* is, of course, one of the ancient texts with the most momentous and influential reception history of its own.²⁸ And perhaps its status as a classic of philosophical esthetics is in part responsible for the curious fact that the *Poetics* is rarely studied as a document of tragedy reception in the fourth century, i.e., as a response to, rather than an initiator of, the cultural dynamics to do with tragedy.²⁹ On a philosophical level, its main target is clearly Plato, who in the *Republic* had argued for an inferior and deceptive ontological status of tragedy qua being the (theatrical) presentation of a representation (our "reality"), hence thrice removed from the truth (the realm of "ideas"). This even led Plato to ban tragedy from the ideal state.³⁰ For Aristotle, on the other hand, tragedy is not just unsuspicious but even natural, because the need for *mimesis* ("imitation") is an anthropological constant deeply engrained in every human being (*Poetics* 1448b4ff.). The adjective "pro-theatrical" can justly be applied to the *Poetics*, not least because Aristotle, at the end of his definition of tragedy (*Poetics* 1449b24–1449b28), credits it with providing *catharsis* ("cleansing") of its recipient. Whatever Aristotle may mean precisely by *catharsis*—the debate is long-standing and remains unresolved³¹—there can be no doubt that Aristotle considers it to be something beneficial, constructive, healthy, and desirable. Tragedy is good for those exposed to it. It is a cultural force that should be embraced and not repressed. This applies in particular

to one tragedy that, according to Aristotle's normative framework, is perfectly constructed, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (Aristotle's preference for Sophocles over Euripides is palpable throughout the *Poetics* and constitutes an interesting contrast to the general taste of the fourth century which, as previously discussed, strongly favored Euripides).

Upon closer inspection, however, the Aristotelian endorsement of tragedy becomes more ambiguous, even problematic, casting an interesting light on the *Poetics* as a document of fourth-century tragedy reception. Not only is Aristotle's above-quoted definition of tragedy highly formalist in nature (it is tragedy's *form* which appears to bring about the desired effect of *catharsis*). One may, more importantly, wonder how valid and applicable a definition and discussion of Greek tragedy can possibly be which ignores the chorus as well as the omnipresence (real or conceptual) of the divine, both of which are clearly two of Greek tragedy's crucial characteristics. Aristotle's secularized formalism is part of a general tendency that can be observed in fourth-century thinking about poetry, namely to separate poetry from its occasion, texts from their contexts.³² One important corollary of this is Aristotle's insistence that *reading* alone is a sufficient condition for tragedy to come into its own and achieve all its effects (*Poetics* 1462a11–1462a14). Performance therefore becomes an add-on, an embellishment of sorts which is, in the last resort, dispensable. While the visual and performative dimension (*opsis*) remains one of what Aristotle considers the six fundamental parts of tragedy (the other five being plot, character, diction, design, and music), it is also the one that is "least essential to the art of poetry" (*hêkista oikeion tês poiêtikês*: *Poetics* 1450b17f.).

This is significant, not least from the vantage point of Reception History. The fact that Attic tragedy is a complex and multi-dimensional performance art was surely central to its creation as an innovative mode of artistic expression, and was presumably a key factor in its enormous success and appeal from very early on. It was the number and range of its *spectators*, voting with their feet, which propelled tragedy to its lofty position as a premier art form, rivaling or even exceeding that of the very best Greek poetry in other genres. It was tragedy's mass *audiences* which were targeted by Aristophanes in his *Frogs* or Lycurgus in his invective against Leocrates. And it was *performance*, possibly aided by texts, which inspired the tragedy-related vase paintings. By re-conceptualizing tragedy as a *text*, Aristotle takes it out of those contexts of production and transfers it to those of consumption as a written cultural product. This has significant consequences, on the one hand, for the mode of analysis which is now "literary" rather than "performative" (diction [*lexis*], for instance, becomes quite prominent, and Chapters 19–22 of the *Poetics* are devoted to it). The repercussions of this "literalization" of tragedy in the *Poetics* were to be felt for centuries in the Western theory of theater (arguably until the work of the semioticians from the "Prague Circle" in the 1930s). But there were also sociological consequences, along very similar lines developed earlier on for the tragedy-related artifacts. A literary text, which requires the ability to read well, creates very different, and highly restrictive, barriers of access,

whereas performance is, in principle, accessible to all. As a literary item, tragedy, very much like the tragedy-related symposium vessel, becomes a cultural product for elite consumption, to be savored on demand by the few.

The final Chapter 26 of our preserved *Poetics* is a remarkable piece for the history of tragedy reception, and a fitting conclusion to this chapter. Here Aristotle confronts head-on the question of whether epic or tragedy is the superior form of poetry, with tragedy emerging as the winner. A decisive argument advanced by Aristotle is the one just discussed, namely, that for him, tragedy, like epic poetry, can come into its own by reading alone, i.e., without movement and performative instantiation (which may amplify the pleasant effect) (1462a11–1462a19). While being of equal value to epic in this respect, tragedy, Aristotle maintains, surpasses epic in other aspects, notably by virtue of the fact that tragedy achieves its goals in a significantly more compressed format than the long epics like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a phenomenon which itself provides greater pleasure (1462a18–1462b3). This de-throning of “divine” Homer (as he is called, by “Aeschylus,” at Aristophanes *Frogs* 1034!) is one of the most interesting moments in the *Poetics*. Two hundred or so years after the invention of tragedy, Aristotle endorses a veritable paradigm shift in the realm of Greek poetics, and therefore much of Greek cultural and intellectual life. And the rich, complex, and enthusiastic engagement with tragedy that can be detected in other written, performed, and material evidence makes it clear that in his high esteem of tragedy as the pinnacle of poetic art Aristotle was far from being alone.

Notes

- 1 *Vita Aeschyli* 11f. in Radt (1985: 34f). On the biographical tradition of the three canonical tragedians as a mode of reception, see Hanink (2010). The (regular) practice of establishing cults for poets is the subject of Clay (2004).
- 2 Revermann (1999–2000: 456–458). See Chapter 3 for the spread of Greek drama in the Hellenistic world.
- 3 Again, away from the home-city at the court of the Macedonian king Archelaus where he was buried. The Athenians erected a cenotaph in his honour: test. in 121–133 in Kannicht (2004: 104–108). Sophocles, who died shortly after Euripides and before the first performance of *Frogs*, is the only tragedian of the canonical triad to have remained in Athens and died there.
- 4 Willi (2008) 166f. On the theater culture in Sicily more generally, see Bosher (2014) and Willi (2008: 119–161). It is surely significant in this context that while Sicilian comedy was a thriving art form, there is no evidence of a Sicilian tradition of tragedy.
- 5 Revermann (2006a), Bakola (2010).
- 6 Sommerstein (1993: 461–466). The text of *Frogs* we have shows anomalies (see Wilson, N. [2007]: 183) which may well be due to authorial revision for re-performance.
- 7 Revermann (2006a: 69f.).
- 8 On stratified and layered audience competence in the fifth and fourth centuries, see Revermann (2006b), on fifth- and fourth-century theater audiences in general, see Roselli (2011).

- 9 The fullest discussion of the speech is Engels (2008).
- 10 Beloch (1884: 237). On the severity of Lycurgus' charge, see Engels (2008: 25f).
- 11 Parker (1996: 251).
- 12 See Lanni (2006: 31–40) for a succinct discussion of the Athenian legal system. Wohl (2014) points out that with juries varying in size between 201, 401, 501 or even bigger, the potential Athenian jury pool in any given year was 6000 citizens, which amounts to 10–20% of the whole citizen body.
- 13 Lycurgus 100 = fr. 370 in Kannicht's edition of fragmentary plays by Euripides (Kannicht 2004: 391–418). This substantial chunk is a major, even if not the biggest, part of the text we have of this fragmentary play. On the play, see most recently Collard and Cropp (2008: 362–401) (with references to earlier scholarly discussions).
- 14 The parallels between court and theater are discussed by Hall (1995; 2006).
- 15 On this practice, see Wilson (1996: 312), n. 10.
- 16 Zeitlin (1990).
- 17 Fr. 370.90–97 K. On the Eteobutadai, see Parker (1996: 290–293).
- 18 For a more detailed exploration of this topic, see Revermann (1999 / 2000).
- 19 Wilson (1996: 312f.).
- 20 Pickard-Cambridge (1988: 101–125), Millis and Olson (2012).
- 21 Csapo (2010: 5f.) justifiably excludes satyr-play from his survey.
- 22 Csapo (2010: 71–73) with further literature.
- 23 The exact figures in Taplin (2007) are: Euripides: nos. 31–82 (52 items); Sophocles nos. 22–30 (9 items); Aeschylus nos. 1–21 (21 items); otherwise unknown tragedies: nos. 83–109 (27 items). So almost half of all the vases discussed can, more or less plausibly, be linked with Euripides; and there are close to twice as many Euripides items as those linked, more or less plausibly, with Aeschylus and Sophocles together.
- 24 Taplin (1993: 67–78). Also note Csapo (2010: 8f.) on a tragedy-related (!) fragment of an Attic column crater from the 420s (published in 2002) which shows, among others, an *aulos* player and his assistant (this vase painting is the prize exhibit in his exploration of theatrical "realism").
- 25 The excellent standard work on the Athenian *chorêgoi* is Wilson (2000).
- 26 Jordan (2007) and Wilson (2007a).
- 27 Since the role of Macedon in the dissemination of tragedy was emphasized earlier on, it is worth recalling Aristotle's very close links to the Macedonian court, especially in his role as tutor to the adolescent Alexander. Some of Aristotle's exposure to tragedy, including theater performances, may well have occurred in Macedon.
- 28 See Chapter 7 in this volume for its role in Renaissance Italy.
- 29 Halliwell's extensive work on the *Poetics* is foundational, especially Halliwell (1998). Heath (2009) similarly stands out. Tarán and Gutas (2012) provide the first text of the *Poetics* to take fully into account its Arabic translations and commentators.
- 30 A stimulating account, by a non-Classicist and non-philosopher, of Plato as the founder of the "anti-theatrical prejudice" is Barish (1981: 5–37). On Plato and *mimesis*, see Halliwell (2002: 37–71).
- 31 Halliwell (1998: 350–356) provides a well-structured overview of interpretations that have been proposed.
- 32 Ford (2002) is an engaging and important discussion of this shift in the critical agenda.

Guide to Further Reading

There is currently no history of tragedy reception which integrates both the fifth and the fourth century. The fourth century, however, is the exclusive focus of Csapo *et al.* (2014) as well as Hanink (2014), and a central interest in Gildenhard and Revermann (2010). Taplin (1999) and Csapo (2010: 83–116) discuss the dissemination of tragedy (and theater in general). On the very little that remains of fourth-century tragedy, see Hall (2007) and, for a recent addition to the fragmentary evidence, West (2007). Despite its focus on the reception of Menander in antiquity, Nervegna (2013) is of importance to any student of drama reception in antiquity. For the exciting and difficult area of tragedy-related vase paintings from Attic and Western Greece, see Csapo and Slater (1995: 53–64), Taplin (1997) and (2007) (primarily interested in matching pots with plays), Osborne (2008) (on artistic conventions when dealing with theatrical subjects), Revermann (2010) (on the contexts of reception of tragedy-related vase paintings) and Csapo (2010: 1–82) (the most ambitious and holistic discussion). On Aristophanes' *Frogs*, see Griffith (2013), on Lycurgus, see Parker (1996: 242–255) and, on the Greek orators more generally, Wilson (1996). Good introductions to Aristotle's *Poetics* are Halliwell (1998) as well as Heath (2013: 56–103). The point and methodologies of Reception Studies are discussed, more broadly, in Hardwick (2003) and, with a specific focus on tragedy reception from antiquity to the Middle Ages, in Gildenhard and Revermann (2010: 1–35).

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