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TRAGEDY AS “AN AUGURY OF A HAPPY LIFE”*

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1.

In 472 B.C.E. or thereabouts, Aeschylus paid a visit to Sicily.¹ As the city of Aetna was just at that time being established on the island, the already eminent tragedian made a present to his host Hiero, and to the other founders of the new colony, in the form of a performance of his tragedy the *Women of Aetna*. According to his *Vita* as recorded in the Medicean manuscript, Aeschylus presented this play to the settlers as a kind of auspicious good luck gift, literally “as an augury of a happy life for the people who were uniting in the settlement of the city.”²

A tragedy? Offered as an augury of happiness? Anyone schooled in the Aristotelian theory of tragedy will be surprised to hear about this. Doesn’t Aristotle say that tragedy should depict a change in fortune from happiness to misery and not the other way around (*Poetics* 1453a 13)? Doesn’t he say that happy endings belong in comedy (1453a 36–38), and that tragedy, on the contrary, traffics in *pathos*, physical suffering and anguish (1452b 10)? And doesn’t he name murder within families as tragedy’s usual subject—murders that, in the best examples of the genre, actually come off (1453b 19–20)? Suffering, pain, murder, the death of loved ones—place these gloomy ingredients in a piteous and fearful plot that depicts a change in

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1 The exact date is uncertain. Herington 1967 argues that it was between 472 and 468.

2 Radt 1985.34. Translation adapted from Paley 1855.xxxiv.

fortune from happiness to misery, as Aristotle says tragedy ideally should, and you're bound to wonder about Aeschylus's judgment in giving a tragedy as a good luck gift to the colonizers of a new city.

Like most Greek tragedies, the *Women of Aetna* has not survived. But the fragmentary remains of this play do point to the likelihood that Aeschylus's present to his hosts at Aetna was well judged after all. The play seems in some way to have celebrated a progress from painful darkness to holy light, from hubristic violence, fear of arbitrary power, and suicidal thoughts, to an auspicious double birth that brought blessings to the inhabitants of Sicily. The story tells of Zeus's ravishment of a Sicilian woman named Aetna (or Thalia), her fear of retaliation from Zeus's wife, and her desire to escape Hera's jealous rage by being swallowed up by the earth. Her death wish seems on the verge of being granted, when there, presumably from the spot of earth into which she prayed to descend, emerged twin boys, the Palici, so called because they "came back" from "darkness to this light," and who were henceforth worshipped by the people in the vicinity of Mt. Aetna (Lloyd-Jones 1957.381).

This tragedy, clearly not without its piteous and fearful elements, seems nevertheless to have gone beyond them to the celebration of a new birth, ultimately to something like deliverance—if not for the long-suffering heroine then certainly for the people of Mt. Aetna. The narrative does not quite fit our modern assumptions about tragedy, however, which tend to follow Aristotle in expecting a tragic story to end in tears, to progress "not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery" (1453a 13–14; trans. McKeon 1941.1467). Was the *Women of Aetna* a less fully evolved, a somehow more primitive tragedy than the plays Aristotle praises in the *Poetics*—works like *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which exemplifies for him the best kind of tragic plot, or the plays of Euripides, whose miserable endings, so moving to audiences in the theatre, convinced Aristotle that the best tragedies should end sadly?³ In fact, it is precisely on the basis of Euripides' success on stage that Aristotle concludes that tragedy is, or ideally should be, synonymous with plays with "unhappy endings": these, he says, "are seen to be the most truly tragic" (1453a 26–30).

What is so curious about Aristotle's association between tragedy and a miserable end is that the evidence offered in the *Poetics* actually

3 Playwrights who end their tragedies happily are just pandering to the public and don't understand the pleasure proper to tragedy: *Poetics* 1453a 34–38.

contradicts it. At two key points, Aristotle acknowledges that tragedy does, in fact, both historically and thereafter, tend toward happiness. At 1449a 19–21, he says that tragedy first developed out of laughable and ridiculous satyr-style performances; and at 1453a 34ff., comparing the different types of tragic plots on offer, he makes no secret of the fact that some do have happy ends. Nevertheless, in a single faulty syllogism in Chapter 13, he gives birth to his famous theory of tragedy, a theory founded on what can only be described as an unsupported prejudice in favour of *unhappy* ends.⁴ Dismissing the counter evidence, the philosopher praises the controversial sad-ending tragedies of Euripides. He grants that “the critics . . . blame Euripides for taking this line in his tragedies, and giving many of them an unhappy ending.” But the critics, he continues, are “wrong”: Euripides’ decision to end his tragedies sadly is, in fact, “the right line to take,” despite what disgruntled critics and audiences might say, because “on the stage, and in the tragic competitions, such plays, properly worked out, are seen to be the most truly tragic” (1453a 23–28). Euripides’ success on stage “in the tragic competitions” is thus offered by Aristotle as “proof” for his “theory” that tragedy in general should end badly.

In reality, of course, Euripides’ plays were generally *not* successful on the stage. Aristotle insists that Euripides, with his sad-ending plays, “is seen to be . . . the most tragic . . . of the dramatists” (1453a 29–30). But by whom? And when? In the fifth century, when Euripides’ tragedies were first performed in competition, they rarely impressed the judges or the vocal audiences whose preferences guided them.⁵ Compared with the sensational success of Aeschylus, who won first prize thirteen times of the nineteen he competed, and Sophocles, who won at least twenty victories (and never placed third), Euripides won a paltry four times in his life. Contrary to what Aristotle says, then, Euripides’ sad-ending strategy was both censured by the critics *and* unsuccessful “in the tragic competitions.” Judging by the number of times they were awarded first prize, Euripides’ plays were seen not as “the most truly tragic” but, if anything, the *least*.

What, then, does Aristotle mean by citing Euripides’ effectiveness on stage as proof for his theory that tragedy should end unhappily? The

4 Mastronarde 2000.35 writes beautifully of Aristotle’s “schizophrenic” and “polemical” attempts to marginalize tragedies with happy endings—against the evidence.

5 Marshall and van Willigenburg 2004.92 cite the sources for the audience’s attempts to influence the judges, the best from Aelian (*V.H.* 2.13): “They applauded the poet . . . and commanded the judges from above to write no other name but Aristophanes.”

answer is clear: Aristotle must have been thinking of Euripides' fortunes in the competitions of the *fourth* century, when his plays were indeed successful. During Aristotle's own theatre-going days, famous actors often did remount the works of Euripides in the "old tragedy" category, and often did win first prize with them. Significantly, however, with the fifth-century poets long dead and buried, and the fourth-century actor very much alive, the victor in such old-tragedy contests was the actor himself.⁶ Whereas, for example, Euripides' *Orestes* was reportedly ruined at its fifth-century première by a technical error of Hegelochus—who ran out of breath and announced that "a weasel" came over the waves instead of "a calm"⁷—it was expertly revived in the fourth century by the celebrated virtuoso Neoptolemus, whose skill as an interpreter of Euripides earned him repeated first prizes in Euripidean roles and made him an international superstar. In citing Euripides' reception "on stage" in support of his sad-ending theory, therefore, Aristotle must have been thinking of the plays as they were performed in the *fourth* century—that is, as vehicles for star actors like Neoptolemus.

Now the expertise of the fourth-century actor was clearly a boon for Euripides. It transformed him in the eyes of the public from the worst of the fifth-century tragic poets to the best. But it was a catastrophe for our understanding of fifth-century tragedy itself. For as I will be arguing here, new contest rules for tragedy in Aristotle's lifetime, together with the skill of the celebrity actor, had the effect of changing how fifth-century tragedy was staged. Civic celebration was replaced by role-based lamentation—a shift perfectly if unwittingly reflected in the sad-ending bias of *Poetics* 13. Originally performed in a way that augured happily "for the people . . . of the city," the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were presented in the fourth century in a way that, on the contrary, left the audience in tears. Aristotle's curiously self-contradictory theory of tragedy is thereby explained: based as it is on performance practices specific to the fourth century, when the lachrymose "Method" actor was king, Aristotle's theory of tragedy mistakes a celebratory political art for a weepy histrionic one.

6 *Didaskaliai* (IG ii² 2319–23), as cited and translated by Sommerstein 2002.88; also discussed by Easterling 1997b.214–15.

7 The event is alluded to by Aristophanes in *Frogs* and explained in the scholia on *Orestes* 279.

2.

Unexpected though it may be to us today, used as we are to reading fifth-century plays as Aristotle did, that is, out of context, a happy-ending theory of tragedy is actually more in keeping with the historical facts as we know them than the one bequeathed us by the *Poetics*. As, for example, Alan Sommerstein suggests (2002.17, 39, 40), *The Women of Aetna* is no exception to the tragic norm in this respect: all seven of Aeschylus's known tragic trilogies probably ended joyously or well, with progress, salvation, and the blessings of prosperity. As is indicated by surviving texts, hypotheses, and papyrus fragments, Aeschylus's *Odyssey*, *Women of Aetna*, *Danaids*, *Persians*, *Prometheus*, and *Seven Against Thebes* all seem to have ended by auguring well, and, of course, we know for a fact that his *Oresteia* did, in spades. As Sommerstein continues, "Athenian tragedy in general" tends to end with the promise of "a better future" for the city and its people (39). In one way or another, the plays of the fifth-century tragedians celebrate political progress; they show violent deeds being replaced by verbal persuasion; they show "the triumph of the collective values" of the city over the selfish lawlessness of individual aristocrats (40). Like the *Oresteia*, which ends with joy and jubilation for the city of Athens, its immigrants, and its Argive allies, Aeschylus's *Eleusinioi* probably also, according to Sophie Mills, ended by looking propitiously "to a future in which relations between Athens and Argos were friendly" (1997.229). And if the *Oresteia* and *Eleusinioi* are in any way typical, the "better future" that such tragedies promise is contingent on the policies of the city as a whole: on the honouring of peace treaties, on the establishment of an international criminal court based on democratic rules, and on the humane and respectful treatment of immigrants and refugees.⁸

The future prosperity predicted by tragedies such as the *Women of Aetna*, *Eleusinioi*, and *Oresteia*, in short, is political in every sense of the word (Osborne 1993). There may be plenty of pain and death experienced by the monarchs, tyrants, and war criminals represented within these plays, but the ultimate outcome of all such individual suffering is goodness and blessings for the city, its friends and allies. As the *Vita*'s description of *Women of Aetna* has it, the happy life augured by the tragedy is "for

8 See, esp., Podlecki 1993 and Blundell 1993.

the people . . . of the city,” not for the kings and queens of the story. And indeed, everything we know about the history, ideology, and self-image of the Athenian polis in the fifth century unites in explaining why this would be so: monarchs and tyrants were seen to have no place in a (more or less) egalitarian, discourse-based democracy. Their destruction, while heart-breakingly depicted in many tragedies, was, historically at Athens, a precondition for the establishment of the democratic city-state.⁹ Accordingly, the Athenian tyrannicides, those credited with killing off the last remaining obstacles in the way of free self-rule at Athens, were revered as great heroes of the city. By decree of the Athenian people, the children of these tyrant-slayers had special seats of honour reserved for them every year at the front of the theatre from which to watch the tragic contests.¹⁰ A preference in tragedy for plots that end in triumph for the democratic polis, even (or especially) at the expense of the monarchs and tyrants who stood in its way, thus makes perfect sense.

A bias toward a happy end for the people of the city is plain to see in the tragedies of Aeschylus. But it is observable in Sophocles and Euripides as well. *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Madness of Heracles*, *Helen*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, *Orestes*—all of these plays likewise end with salvation for the collective, recovery, disaster averted, and sometimes even with explicit, ecstatic auguries of eternal health and happiness for the people of Athens, as in *Oedipus at Colonus* (Blundell 1993). Among the lost plays of all three tragedians, many based on stories from the (happy-ending) *Odyssey*, Donald Mastronarde finds over thirty additional titles that plausibly ended without fatal issue, or with release, “rescue, reconciliation, or (happy) recognition” (2000.30–33). Scholars have not failed to notice that many Greek tragedies do indeed end well, some downright happily, a fact which Aristotle acknowledges. But rather than allow this fact to alter our idea of tragedy’s ideally miserable essence, we echo Aristotle, and judge these works as “less” tragic than they should be: such plays, we conclude, are not really tragedies at all but “melodramas,” “romances,” “tragicomedies.”¹¹ In reality, however, all of these plays, regardless of how happily they end,

9 For discussions of tragedy as “an instrument for the *rapprochement* of the classes, an emotional unification of all Athenians in a common sympathy for fallen greatness,” see Else 1965.77 and Nellhaus 1989.

10 Isaeus 5.46–47, as cited by Hall 1996.298.

11 Mastronarde 2000.35–38; Griffith 2002.236, and 236, n. 134.

were accepted as official entries into Athens’ annual tragedy contest; they are all, therefore, and equally, tragedies.¹²

Ultimately, however, the happy or good-auguring endings visible in surviving and fragmentary tragedies tell only a small part of the story. We read and teach these plays today as separate, alphabetically catalogued titles, but in their original context, these works were experienced very differently: not as self-contained dramas but as a mere quarter of a four-part competitive event. In the fifth century, all tragedies accepted for performance at Athens’ most prestigious theatre festival were written and performed as tetralogies.¹³ Within legal contexts, the word tetralogy described four forensic speeches concerned with the same case; at the Theatre of Dionysus, a tetralogy was a play with four parts, or acts.¹⁴ As the ancient hypothesis for the *Women of Aetna* says, “During the first act, the scene is in Aetna, in the second, Xuthia, in the third, Aetna again, then it shifts from there to Leontinoi . . . and after that it is Syracuse . . .”¹⁵ As far as we know, all tragedies written for competition at the City Dionysia in the fifth century were similarly composed of four acts—and they were produced, viewed, and judged that way as well. At the City Dionysia, the competition in tragedy was for tetralogies only; poets won for their entire four-part composition, never for an individual act of it.¹⁶ And with a single known exception (courtesy, predictably, of Euripides, who in one year wrote *Alcestis* instead¹⁷), the concluding act of every tragic tetralogy was a satyr play.

As Mark Griffith shows, the satyr play was “regarded as an integral component of the whole competition in *tragôidia*” (2002.196). It was written, rehearsed, performed, and judged as part of the poet’s single tragic

12 Tragedy was a competitive event, like the 100-yard dash: its contestants can be judged better or worse, but their entries are not more or less “100-yard-dash-y,” more or less “tragic.”

13 Ganz 1979 shows that there is no reliable evidence that anything less than tetralogies was ever performed at the City Dionysia in the fifth century. The rules may have been laxer at less prestigious contests like the Lenaia (started in the 430s and always more famous for comedy) and the rural or deme festivals, but these seem to have functioned as Fringe and revival venues, not as competitions for important new tragedies; Dearden 1999.222–48.

14 Ganz 1979.291 cites seven ancient sources for the use of the term tetralogy to describe tragedy, three from the fifth century.

15 Reproduced and translated by Lloyd-Jones 1957.594–95.

16 *IG* 1913–29.2318, 2319, 2325. Seaford 1984.2, 15 dates the beginning of the tetralogy rule to perhaps 502/1.

17 Why Euripides might have violated this rule on one isolated occasion is addressed by Marshall 2000. See also Seaford 1984.2, Easterling 1997a.153, and Gilbert 2002.

entry. The four acts of each tetralogy were staged more or less continuously on a single morning by the same group of actors and choristers, before the same group of spectators and judges, financed by a single *choregos*, and aimed toward winning a single prize. As Griffith demonstrates, all four parts of the tragedy were consistent theatrically, and virtually indistinguishable poetically: they used the same meters, the same staging conventions, the same musical instruments, and the same mythological material (196, and 196 n. 2).¹⁸

And if there is one thing on which all scholars of ancient tragedy agree, it is that the last of these four acts, the satyr play, was a comical, goofy, bawdy work that ended with joy, laughter, and celebration.¹⁹ Because every tragedy that competed at the City Dionysia in the fifth century ended with a satyr play, it is crucial to recognize that, in performance, these tragedies were experienced by their audiences as works that ended well, regardless of how things turned out for individual characters within the first three acts: fifth-century tragedy always ended with satyric revelry and drunken worship of the god of wine.²⁰ Furthermore, as Griffith (2002.214) and George W. M. Harrison (2005.xi) remind us, the satyr play, which likely gave its final lines to the reveling satyrs themselves, was the last thing the audience saw before voicing its preference or casting its vote for the winner of the tragic contest. This “happy last word” of the satyrs was tragedy’s last word, too. Since tragedy was normally written for a single performance—the competitive performance given for the première audience—we are obliged, as Niall W. Slater puts it, “to privilege the experience of that very first audience in our interpretive models” (2005.85). And what that first audience experienced, thanks to the satyrs, was a joyful and celebratory conclusion to all fifth-century tragedy.

Not even a single tragic tetralogy has survived. The *Oresteia* comes closest, of course, lacking only the full text of *Proteus*, its satyr play, of

18 The Pronomos Vase, described by Hedreen as “the most complete and realistic representation of a satyr-play surviving from antiquity” (1992.107), shows the same thing: the creative team competing for the prize in tragedy was a group that identified itself with satyr plays. See Griffith 2008 for a detailed discussion of the vase and what it depicts.

19 Hall 2006.168, Harrison 2005, Griffith 2002.202–03, Sommerstein 2002.22ff.; also Seaford 1984.1–59, who analyses the “obscenity, hilarity, and joyful endings” of satyr drama in detail (5). Gilbert 2002.85–87 compares the four dominant theories of the satyr play of our time; while they differ in their view of its anthropological function, all agree that the satyr play ended with joy and success.

20 Again, with the single exception of *Alceste*.

which only a few lines are preserved.²¹ Originally a four-part work with a happy ending, the *Oresteia*, like the *Women of Aetna*, may not have been what Aristotle had in mind when he used the word tragedy, but it was probably what playwrights, performers, and audiences understood by the term throughout the fifth century. Given the existence in Athens of bookstores from at least 414, it is likely that the tetralogies themselves began, soon after their premières, to be broken up into smaller units for ease of copying and sale (*Birds* 1288, *Frogs* 52–53).²² But even so, Aristophanes, writing as late as 404, still viewed a passage from the fifty-year-old *Libation Bearers* as part of a larger work, a tetralogy known as the *Oresteia* (*Frogs* 1123–24; also *Thes.* 135).

These two facts—that fifth-century tragedy was normally a four-part affair and that its final act was a feel-good satyr play—are well enough established.²³ Their logical implication, however, still encounters resistance: since fifth-century poets competing for Athens' most prestigious tragedy prize did so with tetralogies,²⁴ a work like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is less a complete tragedy than a quarter of a lost or unfinished play. Did it end sadly? Probably not.

Sophocles makes his intentions for the tragedy fairly clear, given his idiosyncratic treatment of the myth. Whereas, in Homer, Oedipus continues to rule Thebes even after his mother has killed herself and his murder of his father has become known (*Od.* 11.271), Sophocles blinds and dethrones him. He publicly cross-examines him and brings about his disgrace against the backdrop, graphically represented on stage, of a city full of sick and dying men, women, and children. In the act that we have, the citizens of Thebes are afflicted with a ghastly plague; all age groups are affected. Once Oedipus's crimes are uncovered, he takes responsibility for the evil that his regicide has brought to the Theban people. Depending on our vantage point, of course, this already has the makings of a fairly happy end—for the city and its people. Presumably, at least according to the narrative logic that Sophocles has established, now that the murderer of Laius has been

21 See Griffith's (2002.196–260) exciting reconstruction.

22 See Davison 1962.219 for additional testimonia; also Griffith 2002.237 n. 135 for the process whereby the four parts of a tetralogy came to be transmitted as separate titles.

23 Seaford 1984, Easterling 1997a.151ff., Hall 1997.93ff., Sommerstein 2002, Griffith 2002, Harrison 2005.

24 Or intended to: poets did occasionally die before finishing their tetralogies, leaving individual acts to their heirs, who sometimes performed them.

discovered, the plague will end and the health of the people, their animals and crops, will return. What could be a happier outcome than that—especially for spectators who'd experienced the horrors of plague first hand?²⁵ Aristotle focuses only on the consequences of Oedipus's trial for Oedipus himself. But for the citizens of fifth-century Athens, the unmasking of a polluted, plague-causing king would have been good news indeed, a propitiuous promise of restored collective health.

Even on the basis of this single extant act, it is evident that Sophocles' concern is not just with the misfortunes of the tyrant/king, but with how his crimes affect the polis as a whole. The third act of the tragedy may well have brought this basic dramatic action—the salvation of a sick city once a king's hidden crimes are brought to light—to its conclusion. (*Oedipus at Colonus*, which ends with ringing promises of health, prosperity, and peace for democratic, compassionate, law-abiding Athens,²⁶ was performed posthumously, in 401, and is believed not to belong to the *O.T.* tetralogy.²⁷ Too bad; it would have made an excellent third act.) In any case, regardless of how Sophocles ended the trilogy, there is still the matter of the satyr play: a tragedy wasn't over till the goat-boys sang.²⁸ Thus

25 The plague of 430 killed one in four Athenians, so it's safe to assume that every person in the audience had either lost a child or a parent or some other loved one to it, or, like Thucydides, endured a non-fatal bout of it himself.

26 Blundell 1993.

27 Whether it was premièred in this year or restaged by Sophocles' grandson after the poet's death is not known. Most scholars assume it was a première, in which case it could not have belonged in the same trilogy as *O.T.*: Easterling 1997b.217.

28 Or horse-boys, if you follow Harrison 1902 and Else 1965. But as Hedreen 1992 argues, even the earliest Attic satyrs seem to be representations of *performers in costumes*. If this is true, then satyrs must be analyzed with reference to their theatrical function as characters in a Dionysian performance, not with reference to their anatomical similarities to animals in nature. As Lévi-Strauss 1982 shows, theatrical masks and costumes obey a functional, not a zoological logic. Satyrs may have some equine physical features and may, indeed, have derived mythologically from centaurs or silens (their father is a silen); but as theatrical characters, satyrs came to be associated with goats with all their Pan-like characteristics (snub noses, love of piped music, caves, and rustic frolicking), for the simple reason that, as companions of Dionysus, they have a lot in common with them. Unlike horses, goats are functionally conjoined in ancient testimony (not to mention world-wide myth and folklore) with wine, wineskins, grape vines, and Dionysian viniculture. Known for their concupiscent and lechery, goats also enjoyed various concrete connections to the life and rituals of Dionysus. Aeschylus, in *Prometheus Pyrkaeus* (frag. 207) and in *Ichneutai* (365–70), likens his satyrs to goats (though see Shorey 1909), and Euripides associates the goat with Dionysus (*Bacchae* 136–37). Herodotus memorably connects the goat with randy sexuality (2.46.4), a quality also stressed by Diodorus Siculus (1.6) and Apollodorus (2.1.4).

even this archetypal heartbreaker would have been a much happier work in performance than we would guess on the basis of the *Poetics*. Consider, for example, the satyr play with which Aeschylus concluded *his* Oedipus tragedy. It was called *Sphinx* (Radt 1985.111). The title alone, with its suggestion of a meeting between that humorless, man-eating bitch, the sphinx, and a bunch of drunk and horny good-for-nothing satyrs, is almost enough to make us laugh by itself.

And it was not only the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles that ended with satyric joy and release, with Dionysian “extremes of happiness” (Wilson 2002.59). Even Euripides, who thumbed his nose at tradition in so many ways, dutifully submitted four-part plays to the City competitions.²⁹ Aside from ending their satyr plays happily, it is not known how the tragic poets organized their tetralogies. In the absence of every trilogy save for the *Oresteia* and virtually all satyr plays, no generalizations are possible. Tragedians may have unified the four acts narratively, as Aeschylus did, or thematically, as Euripides seems to have done (Müller 1993.241, 252), or according to principles unknown to us or chosen afresh for each work. But regardless of how the material was arranged, it was *always selected* with a tetralogy structure in mind. Euripides may have taken every other liberty with his tragic muse, but her tetralogy structure was apparently inviolable.³⁰ Consequently, and despite what Aristotle says, fifth-century tragedies, even those of Euripides, ended happily, with satyric success and celebration.³¹

3.

So few tragedies survive, and in such disjointed condition, that it would be impossible either to confirm or refute this thesis from internal

Varro (*de Re Rustica* 1.2.18–19, 2.11.11–12) and Virgil (*Georgics* 2.371) link goats with wine, Dionysus, and the shaggy goatskins worn by tragic choruses. In an Old Testament commentary, the goat is even said to be the discoverer of wine (Dunphy 1996).

That satyrs, despite their sometimes horsey tails, were not, in fact, synonymous with silens is made quite clear in Plato’s *Symposium* (222d 3–4), which makes a point of distinguishing between them: Alcibiades is said on second thought to be silenic, *not* satyric (Usher 2002). For this and other evidence of the goatish nature of the Dionysian stage satyr, see Horace *Odes* 2.19, as well as Winkler 1990, Rowland 1973.80–84, and South 1987.209–10.

29 Whether *Alcestitis* really ends happily is disputed; see Slater 2005.83–101.

30 Hall 1996; also Seaford 1984.59: Euripides’ extant satyr play ended its tragedy with the jubilant “triumph of Dionysus.”

31 Again, with the single known exception of *Alcestitis*.

evidence. Luckily, there is a key piece of external evidence. Properly interpreted, it confirms that the tragedian who flouted the expectation for a propitious outcome by the end of his tragedy did so at his peril. In fact, it might even suggest that such an outcome was expected by the end of the trilogy, irrespective of the satyr play. I'm thinking of the case of Phrynichus, Aeschylus's slightly older contemporary. According to Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1990), Phrynichus was famous for many things: his beauty, his sweet melodies, his skill as a dancer and dance teacher. His tragedies, none of which survives, include such titles as *Egyptians*, *Danaids*, *Alcestis*, *Women of Pleuron*, *Antaeus*, *Tantalus*, and *The Phoenician Women*. His *Vita* as recorded in the Suda lexicon also credits him with introducing the first female characters into tragedy. But most interesting to us here is that, according to Herodotus (6.21), he was at one point in his career fined 1,000 drachmas for presenting a tragedy that made the Athenians weep. A tragedian? Censured and fined for bringing tears to the eyes of his spectators? Anyone schooled in the Aristotelian theory of tragedy will, again, be perplexed by the historical record. Isn't that exactly what tragedy was supposed to do?

In the late 490s, in the immediate aftermath of the slaughter of the rebellious citizens of Miletus by their Persian overlords, Phrynichus presented a play at the festival about the sack of this Ionian city, essentially a current event. According to Lloyd-Jones (1990.232), it had been a notorious bloodbath, and one for which the Athenians felt responsible: having at first provided aid to the rebels, they withdrew it when the going got rough, abandoning the Milesians to their doom (233). Because Miletus and Athens were both at this time technically in violation of their treaties of vassalage to Persia, the Athenians also understood that they were next (Rosenbloom 1993). Unlike Aeschylus and Aristophanes, who were also prosecuted on various alleged offences but who seem to have successfully defended themselves, Phrynichus was charged, tried, and found guilty by the Athenians in 493 for "reminding the citizens of a calamity that was their very own" by performing his tragedy *Sack of Miletus*. The decision also included an injunction forbidding any future productions (Herod. 6.21).

Because tragedies written about current events were at this time rare, the significance of Phrynichus's court case is easily obscured by the (reasonable) assumption that his error consisted of his decision to base his play on recent history (rather than on an archaic myth). But this assumption cannot be correct, for even after being punished for staging *Sack of Miletus* in 493, Phrynichus went on, in 476, apparently without incident, to stage a play about the Persian invasion of Athens, which was also a true

event from recent history, and one which, moreover, was successfully dramatised again four years later by Aeschylus. What, then, was the difference between Phrynichus's *Sack of Miletus* and his *Persians*,³² the difference that would explain why one was outlawed and the other tolerated and even imitated? Not their degree of fictionality or currentness, clearly, since both were based on equally factual, equally fresh events. The difference, quite simply, is that things end badly for the Athenians in *Sack of Miletus*, whereas in *Persians*, they end well.

Given the political, religious, and theatrical context in which fifth-century tragedy was performed, a bad ending for the Athenians would likely have been seen as just plain inappropriate. In the first place, as Helene P. Foley (1993) demonstrates, public lamentation over slain friends and family was viewed in fifth-century Athens as a potential stimulus for vigilantism. Both anthropologically throughout the world and historically for fifth-century Athens there is a documented "intimate relation between lamentation and vendetta" (104). Public displays of grief over murdered loved ones and friends tend to stimulate calls for vengeance, for acts of answering violence to punish those responsible. According to Margaret Alexiou, "the dirge is always strongest where the law of vendetta flourishes, as in Sicily" and other Middle Eastern locales today.³³ Similarly, as Foley shows, a direct causal link between lamentation for "one's own" and a lust for revenge is drawn in many Athenian plays.³⁴ In place of the vendetta, in place of lawless vigilantism, the Athenians were trying to instill a taste for legal process, for the non-violent, rule- and discourse-based methods of conflict resolution associated with the jury courts. As Foley suggests, it is therefore no coincidence that the elaborate funeral lament and vendetta justice both came to be outlawed in classical Athens (116). A tragedy like Phrynichus's *Sack of Miletus*, which stimulated the Athenians to loud lamentation and a public display of grief for "their very own," might well have looked like an uncivil incitement to violence, a violation of dearly held Athenian norms and values.

This is not to say that the Athenians didn't expect to weep, suffer, and feel *ekplêxis* at the theatre (Mastronarde 2000.29); W. B. Stanford

32 Phrynichus seems to have written two separate tetralogies about the Persian Wars, *Persians* and *Phoenician Women*. See Rosenbloom 1993.169 and 184, n. 84.

33 As cited by Foley 1993.115.

34 Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers* and *Seven Against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Suppliants*. See Foley 1993.

demonstrates that they did (1983.3–25). It's a question, rather, of whom they were weeping *for*. As Phrynichus's case shows, the fifth-century tragedian enjoyed *carte blanche* when it came to making the Athenians cry for Persian despots and Theban kings; but woe betide him if he made the mistake of inciting them to lamentation over their own city, allies, or friends.³⁵ Calamity was welcome in their tragic theatre, just not "a calamity that was their very own."

Second, the theatre festival itself would likely have further discouraged outcomes that augured badly for the city and its people. Tragedy in Athens was performed competitively at wine festivals held in honour of Dionysus, most importantly at the City Dionysia in early Spring. Everything we know about the way this annual event was celebrated shows that it was a very patriotic affair. The festival's atmosphere and pre-contest civic rituals indicate this clearly: foreign dignitaries and allies were present in the audience; Athenian war orphans were paraded across the orchestra in their state-subsidized armour; the silver coins brought to town by Athens' allies in payment of their military dues were displayed on stage; awards were given to individuals for outstanding service to the city; and the names of new citizens (or freed slaves) were read out.³⁶ Civic self-celebration continued during the dithyramb contests, with their annual massing of the men's and boys' choruses, each fifty-member choir representing the present strength and future promise of the new, democratically constituted tribes of Athens. Next came the tragic choruses, the cream of that year's crop of military school graduates, the new flower of Athens' fighting force, dancing and singing together in military rank-and-file formation for hours (Winkler 1990). The festival was as much a "Pride Parade" for the city of Athens as an observance of the rites of Dionysus (i.e., wine drinking, religious ceremonies, and banqueting). Given the extreme superstitiousness of the average Athenian,³⁷ a

35 See Zeitlin 1990 for Thebes as the city in Attic tragedy where bad things can happen. Also Rosenbloom 1993.183, who argues that while Athens' "actual and ideological enemies" (Persians, Thebans, and Peloponnesians) are shown to suffer bad ends in tragedy, Athens is the place "where resolution and healing of tragic violence can take place."

36 Hall 1996.298 and 306, notes 10–15 reviews the evidence for these civic rituals and cites their sources in Aristophanes, Isocrates, Demosthenes, and elsewhere. For the implications of these social rituals for tragedy, see Winkler 1990 and Zeitlin 1990.

37 See Krummen 1993.217 for the need for a "propitious end" to tragedies given their possible function as "a sort of counterpart to the religious fortification meant to generate the goodwill and benediction of the gods and heroes by presenting 'the good city' to them." She discusses tragedy's function of "provid[ing] the citizens of Athens with a sense of stability and community" well-being. Also Easterling 1997a.154.

characteristic well-attested throughout the fifth century,³⁸ a play that ended badly for the Athenians, their friends, allies, or fictional stand-ins would likely have been considered a very bad omen indeed.³⁹

4.

Thanks to their tetralogy structure, their satyric conclusion, and their civic, celebratory context, the tragedies of the fifth century are more likely to have ended with cheers than in tears. Because he ignores such matters, Aristotle ends up with a much more lugubrious theory of the genre than is warranted. His strategy in the *Poetics*, to focus on the misery of the characters represented *within* the tragedy, while sidelining the happiness of the real-life citizens *at* the tragedy, has not gone unnoticed. Edith Hall (1996), for example, views the *Poetics* as a deliberate effort on Aristotle’s part to purge Athenian tragedy of virtually all of its Athenian, polis-related elements. She shows how he seems conspicuously to avoid mentioning any specifically Athenian tragic heroes, and how he says nothing about the theatre festival or its civic rituals. He refuses even to use words like “citizen,” “city,” “city-state,” “people,” “Athens,” and “Athenians” in connection with tragedy at all, effectively erasing its civic aspect. In a similar vein, Page duBois notes (2004) that Aristotle never even mentions Dionysus, in whose honour all tragedies were performed, and has little to say about the satyr play, which comprised a quarter of every City Dionysia tragedy in the fifth century.

This last omission is especially glaring. To fifth-century spectators and performers alike, “the song of the satyr-dancers” was perhaps the only thing that every tragedy had in common. An individual poet’s narrative fancy may have caused the choristers to impersonate Phoenician women in one act, Persian eunuchs in another, and Argive elders in the third; in the fourth act, however, they’d always appear as Dionysian party animals. Why doesn’t Aristotle mention this? Tragedy was an Athenian form of musical theatre

38 See Thucydides 6.27.1–28.2 on the mutilation of the *hermai*, c. 415, for an account of the Athenians’ fear of bad omens.

39 Consider Diodorus’s story about Neoptolemus’s command performance for Philip of Macedon at Aegae. Asked to “sing something propitious” for Philip’s campaign against the Persians, the actor obliged with a piece about “overweening plans”; after Philip’s assassination in the theatre the next day, people said that the performance had obviously been inauspicious after all, since the poem evidently applied to Philip rather than to his Persian adversaries: Diodorus 16.92–93, cited by Easterling 2002.339.

that featured twelve or fifteen member citizen-choruses dancing and singing together for four hours straight, in four different sets of masks and costumes, in front of audiences of up to 7,000 people,⁴⁰ many of them relatives and friends; Aristotle's single reference to the tragic chorus is that it should be treated "as one of the actors" (1456a 25). This is an odd thing indeed to say about a dozen dauntingly athletic dancing soldiers, who regularly performed in drag and always, at least once per play, did so naked except for a pair of furry goatskin underpants, a little fake penis, and a tail.⁴¹

Hall and duBois attribute many of the distortions of the *Poetics* to the particulars of Aristotle's political situation. As a Macedonian outsider, as an only occasional resident at Athens, as someone who lived after its hey-day of radical democracy was past, Aristotle would naturally have viewed tragedy very differently than did the fifth-century Athenians themselves. But because his theory is not just subtly but in some respects significantly distorted, both scholars find themselves concluding that Aristotle's misrepresentations were, at least to some degree, *deliberate*. Hall entertains the idea that his de-Atticizing and de-politicizing of tragedy may have been part of a broader political effort to legitimize Macedonian expansionism. This must remain speculation, she says; but whatever his motives for it, Aristotle's fiddling with tragedy was "undoubtedly conscious" (1996.305). By divorcing tragedy from the Athenian polis, Aristotle was globalizing and immortalizing it for the rest of us, convincing first non-Athenians, and then everyone else, that tragedy is an art form with universal application and relevance. Helped along by Aristotle's prescient lies, or so this line of thinking goes, tragedy went from being a local seasonal celebration of a specific city-state to being an inspiring artistic ideal for all the world. DuBois contends that, whether consciously or not, Aristotle was aiming to redefine tragedy "from the perspective of power, administration, and the cultivation of individual contentment," which meant effacing the "collective," communal, and political energies that had produced tragedy in the first place (2004.68). Whereas Hall sees the bright side of all this, duBois is less sanguine, describing Aristotle's revisionism as the first shot fired in a long Western war against communal values on behalf of an anti-democratic ideology of pure individualism.

40 Thanks to C. W. Marshall for alerting me to Csapo 2007.

41 See note 34 above; also Webster 1960.256: "The shaggy loincloths are too shaggy for horses and must indicate the goat element in the satyr's composition."

5.

What it seems to me that both scholars underestimate is the actual experience of tragedy that Aristotle would have had in the theatre. The political context that shaped the *Poetics* is obviously important, but so, too, is the theatrical context. Aristotle notes that he will not be discussing the state of tragedy "now" and "in relation to the theatres" (1449a 8–10); had he done so, a concrete explanation for his sad-ending theory of tragedy would probably have been visible long ago.

That Aristotle attended plays in the theatre is virtually certain: he wrote a (lost) treatise on stage effects (*Poetics* 1454b 15–18) and knew about the habits and quirks of the actors of his time. He records, for example, that the actor Theodorus refused to let any other actor walk on stage before him (*Politics* 1336b 27). He speaks about actors' vocal training in relation to their records of success in the contests, and about the gestures that they added to their scripts in performance.⁴² In Chapter 18 of the *Poetics*, he mentions the contemporary practice of interpolating whole speeches from other plays into tragic performances (1456a 30–32). He was also familiar with the work of contemporary playwrights such as Carcinus, Astydamas, and Theodectes (*Poetics* 1452a 27–1455b 29). References to the state of tragic performance in the fourth century are scattered throughout the *Poetics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*. Together, they convey Aristotle's sense that, in the theatre of his time, "the actors [had come to] count for more than the poets" (*Rhetoric* 3.1403b 26–31).⁴³ His diagnosis was apparently correct. No tragedies have survived intact from the fourth century, while the reputations of many tragic actors have.⁴⁴ New (and admired) tragedies continued to be written and performed, but the actor, now an international celebrity, seems to have emerged as the star attraction (Easterling 1993). Aristotle was clearly aware of the power and prestige of actors in his time and seems not to have approved of it. But what he doesn't mention anywhere, and may not have known since it happened before his birth, is that the rise of the celebrity actor was accompanied by significant changes in the nature of tragic competition.

42 Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.1404b 22, 3.1403b 31; *Politics* 7.1336b 28, all discussed by Falkner 2002.359 and Easterling 2002.328, and n. 1.

43 See also Sifakis 2002 and Csapo 2002.

44 Some think *Rhesus* is a fourth-century tragedy; Seaford 1984.2 thinks it's "probably spurious."

Starting in 386, two years before Aristotle was born, competitions in tragedy at the City Dionysia had begun to include a new feature: the revival of an “old” tragedy. In addition to the new works written each year by living poets, tragic competitions began to feature remounts of the classic tragedies of the fifth century as well. Didaskalic records of the plays chosen for revival after 386 show that Euripides’ were the favourites.⁴⁵ We learn also from the records that these plays were selected by the actors who starred in them—and won with them.⁴⁶ The list of victors for the year 340, for example, says “with an old <tragedy>: Neoptolem[os] with Euripides’ *Orestes*” (see note 6, above). The previous year’s record also shows Neoptolemus winning “with an old <tragedy>” of Euripides, *Iphigenia*. And Euripides was the winning actor’s choice in the old tragedy category again in 339 (Easterling 1997b.214–15). Unlike tragedies in the fifth century, which were chosen for performance (“granted a chorus”) by an administrator of the city and assigned a producer from among its wealthy men, the “same” tragedies in revival in the fourth century were presented by professional actors, who are listed as the victors.

The emergence of an acting profession by the early fourth century, its unionization at some time thereafter,⁴⁷ and the spread of its well-organized circuit across the Greek-speaking world and eventually throughout Italy, Sicily, Egypt, and beyond has been well documented by many scholars, most recently by Easterling (1993, 1997a, 1997b, 2002), Dearden (1999), Hall (2002), and Lightfoot (2002). It’s a process that began as early as 449, when a separate prize for best actor was instituted. Poets like the small-voiced Sophocles, who had initially, like Aeschylus, performed his own plays, seem to have begun deferring to better endowed specialists. Many factors contributed to the disappearance of the performing poet and the rise of the professional actor, some, as Aristotle suggests, political,⁴⁸

45 Page 1987, Easterling 1993.562, Easterling 1997b.

46 A point also stressed by Easterling 1997b.213.

47 The earliest written evidence of the theatre artists and technicians’ union, the *technitai* of Dionysus, is from the first quarter of the third century, but it may have existed earlier; certainly its circuits and networks of contacts seem already to have been in place in the fourth century; see Lightfoot 2002.

48 Aristotle *Rhetoric* 3.1403b 26–31 blames “the defects of [Athenian] political institutions.” Given his low opinion of mass taste, he seems to be suggesting that unbridled democracy is responsible.

others, as Hall proposes, purely musical.⁴⁹ Whatever the reasons, the consequence was that, by the time Aristotle was conceiving the *Poetics*, highly trained musical and histrionic virtuosi were serving as the actors in tragedy instead of the poets.

The didaskalic records of Aristotle’s time indicate this separation of performance from composition; they also show that, in old tragedy, the actor’s prestige exceeded the poet’s. In the new-work category, the poet is listed as the winner; in revivals of old works, it is the actor who wins or loses. This makes sense. In the performance of a classic work that’s already known to the spectators, that features famous passages memorized by everyone at school,⁵⁰ it’s not the poet’s words that are on trial (for these are already acknowledged to be great) but the actor’s interpretation and delivery of them. We see this same shift occur throughout theatre history after the death of a canonical playwright: only in Burbage’s time was it Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; thereafter, it is Betterton’s *Hamlet*, Barrymore’s *Hamlet*, and Branagh’s *Hamlet*. Likewise, Aristotle saw Neoptolemus’s *Orestes* and Neoptolemus’s *Iphigenia*.

When we look a little closer at the records for 341 and 340, years which closely coincide with the likely date of the *Poetics*,⁵¹ we see, however, that Neoptolemus’s *Orestes* and *Iphigenia* were not the same works as had been staged by Euripides—not by a long shot. Neoptolemus performed only a fraction of the original. Gone were three of the four dancing choruses of the original. Gone was the concluding satyr play. All that an actor like Neoptolemus chose (or was allowed) to stage in reviving an old tragedy was a single act, in this case the act that has come down to us as the “tragedy” *Orestes* (or *Iphigenia*). In other words, fifth-century tetralogies were now staged as *monologies* (we might even say monologues). As this was apparently the standard theatrical practice throughout Aristotle’s lifetime (c.

49 Hall 2002.9 speculates that earlier fifth-century tragic music was traditional enough for the gentlemen amateurs of Athens to pick up by ear from fathers and uncles, but that the new, irregularly metered music of Timotheus and his followers (i.e., Euripides) was complex, new-fangled stuff that had to be specially learned by full-time virtuosi.

50 Easterling 2002.337 discusses a story from Plutarch’s *Life of Demosthenes* 7 that suggests that fourth-century Athenians were expected to know as many verses from Sophocles and Euripides as we know from Shakespeare (and n. 40); also Easterling 1993.564.

51 Jones 1962 and Rist 1989 suggest the year 335, Hall 1996.305 says between 367 and 322.

384–322), we have little choice but to realize that Aristotle probably never saw a complete fifth-century tragedy—nor how it ended.

6.

The consequences of this realization for our understanding of the *Poetics* are not trivial. For one thing, it explains, without recourse to Machiavellian or Foucaultian conspiracy theories, how the good-auguring civic aspect of tragedy came to disappear so completely from Aristotle's account. Whereas all fifth-century tragedies had originally been performed as new works, freshly written for the festival each year and bristling with political significance, their reperformance a century later would inevitably have denuded them of much of their political meaning. It is possible, of course, to revive a classic with its political barbs intact or redirected; we do this all the time today. But this is not likely to have happened in Aristotle's theatre: one would have to perform more than a single act of a play in order to convey any real sense of its meaning. Thus a tragedy like *Sack of Miletus*, which while new and topical was politically charged enough to land its author in court, would have been seen by Aristotle quite out of context in every sense: historically, politically, and most of all, *dramatically*, since he'd only have been treated to one of its four acts.

With the old tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides performed throughout Aristotle's lifetime only in decontextualized, heavily excerpted form, the philosopher is likely, quite sincerely, to have mistaken these works for what they had indeed become for the actors who remounted them: an Everyman's Library of "greatest tragic hits," a storehouse of politically neutral scenes and monologues to select from in pursuit of an acting award.

And not only an acting award. As Easterling suggests, power, fame, and large sums of money were also at stake; tragedy in Aristotle's time had spread beyond Athens to become an international phenomenon. Prize-winning actors were in demand at festivals and concerts all over the Greek-speaking world. On the basis of their success at Athens, these actors signed rich contracts for future engagements, not unlike those signed by athletes and opera singers today. As Dearden, Lightfoot, Hall, and Easterling have shown, the great singing actors like Archias, Aristodemus, Athenodorus, Neoptolemus, Nikostratus, Polus, Theodorus, and Thettalus became household names. They performed for royals like Philip of Macedon, served on ambassadorial missions abroad, and enjoyed diplomatic, tax, and military-

service immunity among other privileges.⁵² They were a rich and famous cosmopolitan elite, the jet-setters of the ancient world. Their lifestyles and sex lives filled books of celebrity gossip (Easterling 2002.333). The generosity of their charitable and philanthropic donations vastly exceeded what ordinary people could manage (Easterling 2002.331).

This was the normal state of things during Aristotle’s time. And it was a condition perfectly reflected in the altered use of the word *tragôidos*. As Peter Wilson points out (2002), this word once referred exclusively to a member of the tragic chorus, to the young Athenians who danced and sang in the city’s tetralogies. At some point in the fourth century, however, the word *tragôidos* was taken over by the professional actor to describe himself. A word once used in reference to a local amateur chorus was now the professional title of an international celebrity. No wonder Aristotle describes tragedy as he does, with his focus on the (“universal”)⁵³ actions of suffering heroes: the very meaning of *tragôidos* had migrated from the celebrating community to the histrionic individual.

With their laughing satyr plays removed, and cut down to monologues, the propitious civic musicals of the fifth century were presented in the fourth as wholly serious acting vehicles for individual stars; but the change was not confined to old tragedy. The connection between tragedy and the happy end was sundered even in new tragedy. The satyr play, with all its joyous comic energy, was now performed on its own, before the start of the tragic contest proper: after 386, the satyr play is listed as a separate category, subject to a separate prize. No wonder Aristotle doesn’t make much of the satyr in his discussion of tragedy: by his time, it had nothing to do with tragic composition (or competition) at all.

7.

Given these changes in tragic performance, Aristotle’s experience of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in the theatre would have resembled that of a man whose exposure to the works of Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner was limited to “pops concerts” at which only single movements were played. Or that of the man whose sole experience of

52 Lightfoot 2002; also Easterling 2002.331–33.

53 *Poetics* 1451a 36–b 7. See Hall 1997.94 on Aristotle’s postulation of a “supposedly ‘universal’ significance of tragedy.”

the operatic classics was confined to the type of crowd-pleasing extracts that singers like to program for concerts, galas, and farewell tours.⁵⁴ Now, exposure to the work of Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner exclusively through highlights and “greatest hits” would probably be enough to give a man an abiding love of these composers. But such decontextualized and truncated experiences of the music would *not* be enough for him to set himself up as an expert on symphonic structure or the dramatic form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And yet this is precisely what Aristotle has done (or we have done to him): on the basis of a lifetime of watching single acts of fifth-century tragedies out of context, he wrote what is still considered over two millennia later a definitive analysis of the art of Greek tragedy. Aristotle’s fondness and respect for tragic poetry are not in doubt, nor are his services to it. But as we see from the circumstances under which he was condemned by history to experience them, his understanding of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides is likely to be much less complete than we might assume given his (relative) proximity to their première productions.

Hall and duBois think that Aristotle’s emphasis on the tragic heroes at the expense of the city’s people was the product of some conscious or unconscious stratagem. It seems to me that the nature of the old-tragedy contests explains it much more simply. The amputation of the satyr play removed much of tragedy’s civic-celebratory character. But even in the monology that remained, there would have been additional in-built biases away from the celebrating city and toward the lamenting individual.

In the first place, tragic performances in which the revival repertoire is chosen by famous actors would naturally favour works that emphasized the individual over the chorus.⁵⁵ Such an emphasis on a single (protagonist’s) role could be achieved through selection, by simply choosing plays with a relatively small choral presence (which, in practice, often meant a work by Euripides). But as Thomas Falkner indicates (2002.350–53), it might also be done by altering the play itself: the scholia on *Medea* 520–21 say, for

54 The similarity between some of the fourth-century actor’s favourite scenes and those most associated with opera divas today is uncanny: Ajax’s pathetic, blood-splattered mad scene could be compared to the oft-performed blood-splattered mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and the pathos of Orestes’ illness to that of the famous sickroom scenes of *La Traviata* or *La Bohème*.

55 A famous joke of the late American comedian Bill Hicks comes to mind when contemplating the priorities of actors: (An actor, reading through his script): “Bullshit; bullshit; bullshit; my line; bullshit; my line;” etc.

example, that these lines originally belonged to the chorus, but that they’d been reassigned by the *tragôidoi* to the protagonist. Actors who made such editorial changes were behaving rationally, at least as far as their careers were concerned: there were no awards at the City Dionysia for best choreography, best ensemble singing by a chorus, and so on. The actor who chose to revive a heavily choral play like *Seven Against Thebes*, say, or *Suppliants*, or any other piece with meager opportunities for him to show off his virtuosity, would have been shooting himself in the foot.

With his eye on the only prize that was available to him, the actor of Aristotle’s time had to choose his vehicle carefully. Highly choral works were obviously out. But even among minimally choral works he was still limited. This is because, with the number of ancient actors limited to three, he would be taking on several different roles in the course of the performance. The messengers, shepherds, nurses, friends, servants, gatekeepers, teachers, gods, and other non-heroic parts were shared among himself, as the protagonist (the “first contestant”), and the second and third actors. Today we offer actors two ways to win: as best actor and as best “supporting” actor; Aristotle’s theatre offered only one. How, while sharing multiple roles with two other masked actors, was he to stand out as the best? We know something about the lengths to which actors like Neoptolemus went in allocating the roles in such a way as “to ensure that they might be on-stage as much as possible,” especially for the juiciest acting moments (Falkner 2002.350–53). But not all acts of all tragedies are amenable to this kind of star-centric division of roles.⁵⁶ Consider a play like the *Oresteia*, and you’ll see how difficult it would have been for a star to find the right kind of material. In the *Agamemnon*, for example, the title character speaks only about two percent of the lines; this is no protagonist’s part. Nor is one easy to find. The whole act is made up of a truly democratic miscellany of equally good but equally non-star roles: the watchman, the herald, Cassandra, Aegisthus, and, of course, the chorus of old men. Cassandra’s part is a virtuosic *tour de force*, but taking it would rule out Clytemnestra’s, which is much, much bigger.⁵⁷ Even the role of Clytemnestra is difficult to build an award-winning performance on: what if the audience should prefer the

56 See also Sommerstein 2002.44, who notes that Sophoclean and even Euripidean plays that remain focused on a single character or unified action are, in fact, the exception rather than the norm.

57 Marshall 2003.264 counts the lines, finding that Clytemnestra’s role is about twice the size of Cassandra’s, 344 to 178 lines.

actor playing Agamemnon (or, for that matter, Cassandra) in the scenes that feature them both? And he couldn't very well choose the third act in the trilogy, with its sensational, attention-stealing Eumenides, dueling *di ex machina*, and democratic court scene. Only the middle act, with its almost completely private, family drama atmosphere, could possibly be made to serve as the star vehicle he needs: its action is not diverted to or by the city, and its focus remains quite steadily on Orestes and his single, unified act of family murder. It cannot be a coincidence that these are exactly the features of tragedy that Aristotle emphasizes in his theory.

It is possible that the single acts of tragedies that survive into our time, such as Sophocles' *Electra*, *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, survived precisely because they were the ones judged most suitable for celebrity revivals. And they are indeed perfect virtuoso vehicles, for they allow a star actor to remain on stage through much of the performance in a single role and to show his individual artistry to advantage with minimal interruption from the chorus, the city, and secondary characters. If these unified, single-hero works are the ones Aristotle saw most often in the theatre as representatives of fifth-century tragedy, it's no wonder that he described tragedy as he did. Nor is it any wonder that such works are still with us in such (relatively) large numbers, whereas nearly all of the (unsuitably choral) satyr plays are lost.

But secondly, besides favouring excerpts that focus (or were edited so as to appear to focus) on a single, unified action of an individual character, old tragedy contests in the fourth century would also have had a built-in bias in favour of excerpts full of pathos and individual suffering—again in keeping with Aristotle's image of tragedy. As Stanford reports (1983.3), citing an anecdote of Plutarch (*Moralia* 545f), the actor's ability to draw tears from his audience was considered a much more impressive proof of his skill than making them laugh. According to the actor Theodorus, there is nothing remarkable about making people laugh; anyone can do that. The trick is to make them cry. If this belief was common among fourth-century tragic actors—and it certainly seems to have been, judging from the remarks of the Alexandrian and subsequent ancient scholars (Falkner 2002)—we can easily see where Aristotle got the idea that sadness was more “truly tragic” than happiness. If making the spectators cry was assumed to be the real test of an actor's histrionic skill, then the actors of Aristotle's time would have been wise indeed to choose scenes of tear-jerking pathos and ignore the rest. Judging by the roles for which they were most famous, it appears that this is precisely what they did: in addition to the suffering Antigone,

Ajax, and Electra of Sophocles, it seems that the favourite choices for fourth-century actors' excerpts were the lachrymose heroines of Euripides (Hall 2002.13–14).

Also from Hall we know something about the lengths to which these actors went in pursuing their histrionic objectives. Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other ancient sources testify to the elaborateness of the actor's preparation. The professional actors of Greece were "slaves to their voices," according to Cicero, spending hours on their backs on the floor, or seated in chairs, practicing their scales and warm-ups (*de Orat.* 1.59.251). Alcohol was out,⁵⁸ eels in, gargling advised.⁵⁹ Food was avoided before performances. More revealing still is the story of Polus, who chose an act from Sophocles' *Electra* for revival a few years after Aristotle's death. A highly acclaimed actor, Polus is said to have lost his son a few years before, to have mourned deeply for him, and to have retired from the stage for a while. But in 315 he returned with an extraordinarily moving and tearful portrayal of Electra. As the anecdote from Aulus Gellius reports (6.4), Polus achieved it by carrying to the theatre the ashes of his dead son in an urn and bringing them on stage as a prop in the scene in which Electra must mourn the (supposed) death of her much loved brother Orestes. The powerful emotion that Polus expressed on stage by using real ashes and real grief in place of the fictional ones was apparently remarkable. As this story shows, the histrionic techniques described by Constantine Stanislavski in the twentieth century have been the stock-in-trade of professional actors since at least the fourth century B.C.E.: Polus was practising, *avant la lettre*, such well-known methods for inducing tears as "emotion memory" and "emotional recall through the use of objects."⁶⁰ As it is today, so it was in the fourth century: whoever "is most successful in plunging the city into tears is adjudged the victor" (*Laws* 7.800d–e).

It has long been understood that the programming decisions of fourth-century actors contributed to the process of selection and canonization that, through the centuries, ultimately decided which handful of Greek tragedies, of the thousands written, would survive into our time.⁶¹ Euripides'

58 Was nobody struck by the irony of an artist of Dionysus forswearing alcohol?

59 Hall 2002.23; also Aristophanes *Knights* 347–49, Plato *Laws* 2.665e 8, and Aristotle *Problems* 2.22, 2.46.

60 As discussed at length in his classic actors' handbooks *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Role*, etc.

61 Falkner 2002.348–50, Easterling 1997b.

dramas, for example, exist in higher numbers today than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles put together because fourth-century actors like Polus preferred them and, by staging, helped to preserve them. But it has been little appreciated that this process was also at work in determining two other aspects of our tragic inheritance: the high proportion of single-hero tear-jerkers among our extant tragedies and, as a related phenomenon, since the excerpts performed during Aristotle's time would have shaped his thoughts about tragedy even as they were shaping the canon, the basic outlines of our sad-ending theory of tragedy. Although, as Aristotle noticed, audiences like plays with happy ends, the fourth-century actor had a professional interest in choosing vehicles that offered ample scope for virtuoso tears. Stripped of their satyrs and all but one of their four choruses, the celebrity monologues of Aristotle's time would have had a much weepier, much more hero-centered effect than their fifth-century originals—something that should be borne in mind when we consider Aristotle's hero-centered, weepy theory of tragedy. We continue to accept at face value the impression we get, from surviving plays and from Aristotle's discussion of them, that “most fifth-century drama [focuses] the action upon a single dominant character” (Csapo 2002.136); but this apparent tendency may say more about the needs of the fourth-century actor than about the nature of fifth-century tragedy.

CONCLUSION

In the fifth century, the Greek tragedies as we know them were staged, like the propitious *Women of Aetna*, as good-auguring tetralogies. By Aristotle's time, these plays were being selected and edited by professional actors to serve as showcases for their histrionic skill, their ability to make the spectators cry. Old tragedies were no longer performed in their four-part celebratory entirety, but were excerpted by famous stars like Polus into short, unified, tearful portraits of individual suffering. As a result, fifth-century tragedies came to look like one-act tear-jerkers, merely sad stories of the death of kings.⁶² This type of play, which Aristotle calls tragedy and attributes to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, seems rather to have been the invention of the fourth-century Method actors, self-regarding celebri-

62 *Richard II*, III.ii.155–56: “For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings.”

ties like Theodorus, who wouldn't even allow another actor to precede him on stage—let alone consent to being upstaged by the chorus, the satyrs, or any of the other propitious elements of the civic and celebratory art of fifth-century tragedy.

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