Introduction: proagon

How dramatic poetry came to be associated with Dionysos and his festivals is a complicated question with no clear answer. What is certain is that by the time our evidence allows us to speak of tragedy and comedy as well-defined and distinct literary genres, they are included in a program of direct competition at Dionysian festivals. It would appear that the poetic agon was to some degree responsible for putting the genres on the cultural map, even if their cultic significance and literary antecedents go back well before this. For tragedy, official recognition came in the later part of the sixth century;[1] for comedy we can be more precise: the first victory belonged to the all-but-forgotten Chionides in 486.[2] Thereafter, Dionysian competitions were *the* occasion for dramatic production in Athens, so that by the time Aristophanes began writing comedies the genre had been embedded in an agonistic context for about sixty years. Regardless of comedy's form and character when Chionides practiced it, over the course of the fifth century the constant subjection of the productions to direct competition must have fostered experimentation and adaptation by individual poets. What we know as comedy through Aristophanes is thus likely quite distinct from its earlier form, though any assessment of the genre's development must leave room for the dynamic of innovation operating through the re-expression of a tradition.[3]

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[1] On early dates of tragic production, see Scullion (2002).

[2] *Suda* (χ 318 = Chionides test. 1) reports Chionides' victory eight years before the Persian Wars, and this can be accommodated to fit the inscriptional evidence of *IG* II² 2325 (Victors List), on which the five earliest names have been lost ahead of Magnes, who was certainly victorious in 472 (*IG* II² 2318.8) and achieved eleven victories in total; see Olson (2007) 382–4 for discussion.

[3] Cf. Redfield (1990); Mastromarco (1998). Aristotle (*Po.* 1449ª37–ᵇ9) gives the impression that comedy's form antedated in some respects the genre's official inclusion in the contests, but also assumes that it did not amount to much before then, especially since it was only with Crates that real plots supposedly evolved. For genre as a moving target, see Mastronarde (1999–2000).

The importance of direct competition for the development of Athenian drama has long been recognized, particularly in the case of comedy.[4] For the most part, however, scholarly inquiry has been directed toward literary historical concerns, with interest in the comic corpus lying primarily in the comic poets' frequent references to the festival context, which are accordingly mined to reconstruct festival programs, regulations, production histories, and the like.[5] Considerably less effort has been made to understand the plays as competitive pieces in their own right. This study accordingly endeavors to use our knowledge of the competitive context to derive a framework for interpreting the plays themselves. While the discussion keeps one foot grounded in particulars of festival arrangements and makes use of whatever relevant details about rival poets and their work can be assembled, it is essentially literary-critical. Hence identifying allusions to the competitive background in the plays is only a first step toward demonstrating connections between the performance context and competitive themes that inform extended passages, whole plays, and various structural elements of the genre. The competitive poetics that emerges from this approach draws attention to ways in which the plays can be treated as creative responses to the competitions, designed above all else to help a poet realize his immediate objective of agonistic success over his rivals at the Lenaia or City Dionysia. In short, I argue that festival agonistics provide an underlying logic for the overall thematic design of individual plays, and that by analysis of them we can recover an important strand of the plays' meaning for the poets and their audiences.

An approach that pays attention to the interweaving of agonistic themes begins to capture the implications of Aristophanes' description of dramatic performances at the Dionysia as "choral provocations" (*Nu.* 312 χορῶν ἐρεθίσματα). This may strike us as a bold characterization, but it appears less idiosyncratic in light of Plato's reference to "contests of choruses" (*Lg.* 834e ἅμιλλαι χορῶν). The premium these passages place on the idea of Dionysian performances as confrontations between rival choruses – and by extension, between rival poets, actors and *choregoi* – is explained further by Thucydides' distinction between his own history as a possession for all time and an *agōnisma* composed for an immediate audience: κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα

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[4] In large part because of comedy's habit of referring overtly to its performative context and interests. A passage like E. *HF* 673–7, as discussed by Martin (2007) 54, suggests that a similar effect could be achieved in tragedy. For a more systematic analysis of competitive structures in tragedy, see Larmour (1999); Barker (2009).

[5] Above all, Pickard-Cambridge (1968); Csapo and Slater (1994).

ἀκούειν ξύγκειται (Th. 1.22.4). Thucydides is concerned with historical writing. But even if with the word *agōnisma* he does not have in mind contests at the dramatic festivals,[6] it is enough that he treats the phenomenon as typifying a set of compositional objectives applicable to any competitive undertaking. In contrast with his own concern for a sophisticated reading audience, for Thucydides the agon, as a cultural paradigm, crystallizes the notion of audience reception in an extreme form, entailing an inescapable demand for authors to anticipate and orchestrate a popular response. As a natural consequence of this, an *agōnisma* is uniquely bound to an immediate audience (ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν). That idea has a corollary in Aristophanes' reflections on the mechanisms of the agon in *Wasps*, where he complains that responsibility for the failure of the original *Clouds* lies with those in the audience who were incapable of recognizing the play's comic and artistic virtues in the brief time the contest allowed (1048 τοῖς μὴ γνοῦσιν παραχρῆμα; cf. 1045 ὑπὸ τοῦ μὴ γνῶναι καθαρῶς).[7] Unlike Aristophanes, who at one point shows himself grappling for a paradigm upon which he and his audience can agree (*V.* 54–66), Thucydides makes no attempt to situate his work between the two poles of literary taste, and embraces the risk of failing to gain wide favor.[8] While the terms in which the two authors carry out their discussions become clearer by comparison, in the end the historian and the competitive poet thus part company, the latter bound to confront his rivals and appeal to his audience's tastes and expectations.

Although our limited access to the work of Aristophanes' predecessors, rivals, and successors prevents us from fully appreciating the impact this dynamic atmosphere of competitive performance had on the steady shaping of comedy, his testimony about his own supposed superiority over other poets assures us of the central role competition played in the genre's development. The theme of Aristophanes' incomparable significance for the comic stage is repeatedly encountered in his plays, and will likewise be taken up and examined again and again in this study. But it is perhaps in the parabasis of *Peace*, performed at the City Dionysia in 421 (*Pax* Hyp. III), that the poet is most eloquent in identifying literary innovation as the distinguishing characteristic of what he offers the comic stage. The

[6] It is usually supposed that he is referring to sophistic debates: Morrison (2006) 180.

[7] Compare Cratinus' comments in fr. 360. In the Mytilenian Debate, Cleon likewise offers pointed remarks about the Athenians' agonistic habits and underscores the pressure on an audience to be intellectually agile (Th. 3.38.6).

[8] "The lack of a story-telling element will perhaps make my account less pleasurable" (Th. 1.22.4). Cf. Finley (1968) 44–5 and Gentili (1988) 169, who places Thucydides in "the vanguard of the new book culture."

engagement with his rivals is pronounced in this passage, beginning with
the bold claim that, while other poets should be beaten for daring to extol
themselves in a parabasis, Aristophanes must be allowed this indulgence,
since he is the finest and most renowned of them all (734–8). The chorus
go on to explain:

> For, in the first place, he was the only person to stop his rivals
> from incessantly ridiculing rags and waging war on lice,
> and the first to strip of rights and drive into exile that Herakles
> who kneaded dough and was constantly starving,
> fleeing, deceiving, and being intentionally beaten.
> And he did away with the slaves they always brought out crying – all for this,
> so that a fellow-slave could mock his blows and then ask,
> "You poor thing, what happened to your skin? Did a bristle-whip attack
> your sides in full force and lay waste the landscape of your back?"
> Stripping away such rubbish and filth and low buffoonery,
> he created a lofty art for us and set in place the stones for a towering craft
> with grand words and notions and with jokes not commonly traded.
> Nor did he ridicule your average breed of men and women,
> but with a sort of Heraklean temper he assailed the greatest individuals,
> striding through the rancid odors of hides and the mire of hostile threats …
>
> (*Peace* 739–53)

The evidence Aristophanes offers in support of his claim to be the most
admirable poet of his genre gives the impression that he single-handedly
rescued comic poetry from the morass of trite routines relentlessly brought
back on stage by his feckless rivals.[9] Where they had been content to
work within a range of received material – rags, vermin, Herakles, and
slaves – Aristophanes is a poetic visionary who ennobled the genre by,
among other triumphs, introducing a loftier form of discourse and attack-
ing major figures such as Cleon, as he goes on to assert in the sequel to
these remarks (754–60). Needless to say, the discussion is carried out in
exaggerated terms and is full of the customary distortions, which is itself
only another indication of how the agon shaped the poet's discourse about
himself and his genre. Still, the basic mechanism for the transformation of
a genre, on which Aristophanes' contentions appear to be based, is not in
itself unbelievable: individual poets offer their own innovations in place of
or alongside familiar features, and fellow poets take those innovations up

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[9] His rivals' contrasting lack of innovation may be hinted at in the parabasis' opening verses, in
which the chorus entrust their stage props to attendants and urge them to stay on watch against
the thieves that lurk around the stage (729–31); cf. Olson (1998) 729–31n. Not surprisingly, other
comic poets were similarly interested in the merits of innovation and tradition; see Sommerstein
(1992) 17–19.

and help establish them as part of a repertoire.[10] Stripped of its self-serving tendencies, the picture Aristophanes paints is in accord with Aristotle's summary account of the adaptations and experiments by individual tragic poets.[11]

In many instances, Aristophanes' agonistic rhetoric relies on metaphors and expressions from other competitive contexts. Thus the implication of poetic engagement between rivals encoded in the passage quoted above becomes more conspicuous when Aristophanes' leading claim in *Pax* 739, τοὺς ἀντιπάλους μόνος ἀνθρώπων κατέπαυσεν, is compared to the inscribed vaunt of a certain Sostratos for his "countless victories" in the pankration, the summary of which is rounded off in the final verse with: [πα]ύσας δ' ἀντι[πάλους π]λ[εῖσ]τα ἐκράτεις ἀμαχεί.[12] On the assumption that Aristophanes is only our first witness to this agonistic idiom and did not himself coin it, his assertion becomes more robust by situating rivalry in the Theater within a broader cultural paradigm of competition, casting the poet as a stereotypical victor performing familiar agonistic gestures.

As chance would have it, Aristophanes' remarks can be placed in a livelier and more immediate framework of agonistic posturing and competitive exchange thanks to the remark of a scholiast on *Peace* 749, who points out the similarity between Aristophanes' account of his daring labors of literary reform and a description of Aeschylus' role in the transformation of tragedy drawn from a comedy by Aristophanes' older rival Pherecrates: ὅστις ⟨γ'⟩ αὐτοῖς παρέδωκα τέχνην μεγάλην ἐξοικοδομήσας.[13] The language at certain points is close enough to suggest conscious borrowing (*Pax* 749 τέχνην μεγάλην ... οἰκοδομήσας ≈ Pherecr. fr. 100 τέχνην μεγάλην ... ἐξοικοδομήσας), and the odds of Pherecrates' description being the earlier of the two are better than fifty–fifty, given the relative chronology of the poets' careers and because a description of a tragic poet is more likely to have generated such lofty imagery.[14] In that case, Aristophanes perhaps not only adopts the language of Pherecrates' description but alludes to the circumstances in which it was delivered, for the wording of fr. 100 makes it clear that Aeschylus is speaking and is thus performing a gloating

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[10] Cf. Emerson (1889); Heath (1990).
[11] *Po.* 1449ᵃ7–31; cf. Else (1957) 153–4. The historical basis of Aristotle's summary is not beyond dispute; see Lefkowitz (1984) 152–3.
[12] Hansen (1989) no. 811; from Sicyon, 356 BC.
[13] Σ^VГLh *Pax* 749a (= Pherecr. fr. 100), identifying the verse as from *Krapataloi*.
[14] Geissler (1925) 39; cf. O'Sullivan (1992) 15. Pherecrates' earliest recorded victories belong to the early 430s at the City Dionysia (*IG* II² 2325.56) and mid- to late 430s at the Lenaia (*IG* II² 2325.122).

encomium of himself in the very manner of Aristophanes in his play (esp.
Pax 734–8). The difference is that, whereas Aeschylus' vaunt comes from
beyond the grave and in comparison with his poetic successors,[15] the vital-
ity of Aristophanes' rebuke derives from his positioning against active
rivals in the context of a poetic competition. And although we do not
know if Pherecrates was among the competitors at the Dionysia of 421,
Aristophanes' allusion to him may have a point in any case; with Cratinus
apparently out of the way by now (*Pax* 700–3), Pherecrates must have
ranked among the most experienced poets still competing on the comic
stage.[16] Accordingly, one of the more striking images Aristophanes deploys
in his declaration of what distinguishes him from the other comic poets is
predicated on an idea first presented to the audience by one of his rivals,
and the passage's effect in delivery in the Theater of Dionysos is only fully
appreciated when those associations are restored.

No doubt many other instances where the dynamic of agonistic
interplay underpins the relationship of Aristophanic comedies with those
of his rivals can no longer be detected because of the limited evidence at
our disposal. The essays in *The Rivals of Aristophanes*[17] offered a much-
needed corrective for the study of Attic comedy, by attempting to
reconstruct the broader literary and intellectual framework within which
Aristophanes operated and from which he must have benefitted. The most
far-reaching outcome of those contributions is the possibility of greater
access to the genre by a path that does not necessarily begin and end
with the one poet from whom we have complete plays. Even incremental
advances of our knowledge in this direction have the potential to reshape
our understanding.[18] But the reality of the situation is that we will never
achieve anything close to a reconstruction of the rich atmosphere of
engagement between individual poets that the contests helped establish
as central to the Athenians' experience of comedy. Because I am interested
primarily in how agonistic readings can help discover unified meaning in

The intertextual relationship of these passages with *Ra*. 1004–5 (see Dover (1993) *ad loc.*) is dis-
cussed in Chapter 6.

[15] See *Krapataloi* test. i and fr. 86 for other indications that the plot had an Underworld element. In
Pherecr. fr. 100, παρέδωκα implies that bequeathal of Aeschylus' literary estate is at issue.

[16] *Pax* Hyp. III. Acceptance of Luppe's (1972) theory of five contestants, rather than the three regu-
larly mentioned in the hypotheses (most recently, Storey (2002)), introduces doubt into assess-
ments based on this information. In any event, Pherecrates was active until at least the Lenaia of
420 (Pl. *Prt*. 327d; Ath. 218d = *Agrioi* test. i and ii; Geissler (1925) 42).

[17] Harvey and Wilkins (2000).

[18] The work of I. C. Storey, on Eupolis in particular, deserves special mention in this regard; cf.
Kyriakidi (2007). Bakola (2008) and (2010) promises further results in assessing Cratinus' poetry
and poetics. This last appeared while my book was in press.

the relationship of a discrete comment within a play to the play's broader
themes, I concentrate on Aristophanes first and foremost. To do the same
with fragmentary plays is, with few exceptions (see below), impossible,
at least if the circularity of allowing interpretation of a few fragments to
guide our reconstruction of entire plays is to be avoided. Nonetheless,
I take every opportunity to show how thoughts and expressions in
Aristophanes' plays are reflected in fragmentarily preserved authors,
both on a general level and especially where self-conscious and direct
contact between poets can be surmised and has real implications for
how we interpret a passage or play. If this approach risks missing the cue
for scholarly inquiry provided by recent work illuminating the poetry
of Aristophanes' individual rivals, I nonetheless maintain that applying
the fragmentary evidence in a cautious way to buttress our analysis of
Aristophanes is crucial for placing his plays in their original festival
milieu and opening up their agonistic dimensions.

An example discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 illustrates the per-
sistent pressure and influence exerted on Aristophanes by his rivals, at
both the micro- and macroscopic level, such that attention to such factors
becomes a precondition for a meaningful understanding of the play as a
whole. In the parabasis of *Wasps* (1049–50), the chorus offer the following
comments on behalf of their poet:

> ὁ δὲ ποιητὴς οὐδὲν χείρων παρὰ τοῖσι σοφοῖς νενόμισται,
> εἰ παρελαύνων τοὺς ἀντιπάλους τὴν ἐπίνοιαν ξυνέτριψεν.

> But the poet is considered no less worthy among the *sophoi*
> if in driving past his rivals he crashed his idea.

Here τοῖσι σοφοῖς presents the segment of the audience Aristophanes
hoped to appeal to most,[19] while the corresponding form of his poetry
is designated appropriately in the second verse – with a *para prosdokian*
that emphasizes the metaphor's rhetorical purpose – by the intellectualiz-
ing τὴν ἐπίνοιαν.[20] Motivating the choice of metaphor is its intersection
with the theme of festival competition, so that, as in the *Peace* parabasis,
Aristophanes' identity as poet is projected against the backdrop of rivalry
in the Theater.[21] But the implications go beyond a momentary portrayal

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[19] Though, as Hubbard (1991) 116 points out, ultimately Aristophanes wishes full support from the audience.

[20] At *Eq.* 539 it is Crates' "most clever ideas" (ἀστειοτάτας ἐπινοίας) that allowed him to win the audience's favor. Edwards (1990) 156 n. 6 comments on Aristophanes' use of such terms; cf. Ruffell (2002) 147–8.

[21] For the athletic terminology used here, see Taillardat (1962) 338 n. 4 (on παρελαύνειν) and 434; Campagner (2001) 81 and 255–6.

of himself as a competitive poet. The term ἐπίνοιαν recalls διανοίας, used shortly before to refer to *Clouds* (1044), and the connection is reinforced by concentration on the *sophoi*, to whom, Aristophanes tells us (*Nu.* 518–27), *Clouds* was supposed to be especially appealing. In his tireless effort to distinguish himself from his rivals, therefore, Aristophanes took his literary daring with *Clouds* too far and, by recklessly exceeding the bounds of what was, in retrospect, agonistically prudent, succeeded only in crashing his "idea" and losing the contest. The shadow of his agonistic undoing underpins Aristophanes' entire poetic identity as it is presented in this parabasis (*V.* 1015–17). But even that falls short of capturing the full extent of the competitive background's influence on *Wasps*, for the parabasis only provides a full disclosure of circumstances underlying remarks made in the prologue (54–66) about the positioning of the play at a safer midpoint between the opposed poles of traditional humor and a more sophisticated and adventurous form of comedy, typified first and foremost by Aristophanes' own previous productions.[22] *Wasps* itself is thus characterized from the outset as an act of poetic retrenchment, undertaken in direct response to conditions that prevailed in the comic competitions since the City Dionysia of 423, when *Clouds* was defeated by Cratinus' *Pytine*. Once again, it is by a rare stroke of good fortune that we know enough about those circumstances and the plot of *Pytine* to be in a position to trace the intertextual relationship of *Wasps* to Cratinus' play, which is the form Aristophanes' agonistic response for the Lenaia of 422 takes.[23]

As these examples indicate, overt references to the competitive context often provide the clearest guidance for interpretation of a play's agonistic poetics. Metatheatrical and metapoetic passages accordingly figure prominently in the discussions that follow. Among these, the comic parabasis has pride of place, and its competitive underpinnings are the subject of Chapter 1, which attempts to locate this structure alongside competitive modes of discourse reaching back to the earliest surviving traditions in Greek poetry. I argue that antecedents and comparative

[22] The suggestion by Storey (2003a) that this passage refers to the entries for the Lenaia of 422 (*Wasps*, *Proagon*, *Presbeis*: *V.* Hyp. I. 32–4), while attractive, strikes me as unlikely, given the clear implication that the passage responds to the failure of *Clouds* (accepted also by Storey (2003a) 285) and characterizes *Wasps* against the backdrop of Aristophanes' career efforts, i.e., *V.* 61 referring to the extensive mockery of Euripides in *Acharnians* and *V.* 62–3 referring to the abuse of Cleon at the center of *Knights*. Rhetorically too, it makes little sense for Aristophanes to assure the audience that they will not get a Cleon play again, if the very point of the discussion is to present *Wasps* (alluded to in *V.* 62–3 according to Storey's hypothesis) beside the other entries in the contest. See the analysis of this passage's rhetorical structure by Paduano (1974) 18–19.

[23] Biles (2002), re-presented here as Chapter 4; Ruffell (2002).

models for Aristophanes' competitive poetics are not confined by the literary genre in which he worked. Instead, his response to agonistic conditions and (to the extent we can generalize from the fragmentary evidence) that of other comic poets is best understood within a broader cultural framework of competitive ethics. Indeed, for the sake of this discussion it may be most profitable to think of Aristophanes not as a comic poet, but as a competitive poet working in a comic mode. Thus considered, the problem admits a breadth of evidence that helps shed light on the literary and social conditions from which Aristophanes' competitive poetics emerged.

Examining the parabasis as a mechanism of the competitions is of considerable importance for the chapters on individual plays that follow. But alongside this objective is one of identifying ways Aristophanes increasingly manages to integrate the competitive maneuvering betokened by the parabasis with the fantasy of his plays' dramatic action. Although that shift in paradigms can be observed already in 411 with *Lysistrata*,[24] the play I have selected to illustrate it in Chapter 6 is *Frogs*. The play's more ambitious tackling of that objective operates through the interaction between features of Dionysos' *katabasis* in the first half and the poetic agon of the tragic poets in the second half, from which a sense of Aristophanes' agonistic posturing for the Lenaia of 405 is produced even without an "appearance" by the poet in the parabasis.

My study is thus delimited at one end by a discussion of the comic poet's most unambiguous resource for engaging rivals and eliciting the framing festival context, and at the other by the fullest dramatic expression of those ideals. The chapters in between focus on various other aspects of Aristophanes' competitive poetics. Chapter 2, on *Acharnians*, addresses the merging of the poet's competitive biography with the similarly agonistic experience of his hero, Dikaiopolis, giving particular attention to the metapoetic signals generated by themes of festival celebration and festival competition in the dramatic plot. That convergence of identities and of the agonistic narratives connected to them undergirds the remaining chapters.

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[24] In this play Aristophanes replaced the typical parabasis with a double syzygy featuring split choruses (614–705) bantering against one another in each structural segment in a way that epitomizes in dramatic terms the poet's own description of "choral provocations" at the Dionysian festivals (*Nu.* 311–12). In particular, 614–15 and 636–7, which introduce each half-chorus' first display, are modeled on the katakeleusmos of the epirrhematic agon and thereby intensify the antagonistic nature of the performance.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Aristophanes' most important rivalry during the initial phase of his career, with Cratinus. Chapter 3, on *Knights*, treats the comedy's interaction with the phenomenon of victory commemoration and record-keeping at the festivals. Reestablishing the place of these "para-literary" contributions to the festival ambience, as the Athenians experienced it, reveals Aristophanes' epinikian[25] commentary on his victory over the veteran poet at the previous Lenaia and clarifies the rhetorical use he makes of this outcome to frame his encounter with Cratinus at the Lenaia of 424.

Chapter 4 elaborates on this rivalry, exploring the intertextual responses (alluded to above) between Aristophanes and Cratinus in the sequence of plays represented by *Knights*, *Pytine*, and *Wasps*. *Pytine* is the centrepiece for my study; not only can we reconstruct the play's dramatic action and thematic interests to an extent approached nowhere else in the corpus of comic fragments, but we can also place the significance of those themes definitively in relation to Aristophanes' agonistic career. The dynamic of competitive response and adaptation that defines the relation of this play with the two Aristophanic comedies produced before and after it provides the clearest indication of what is missing from our understanding of other comedies of the period.

The place of *Clouds*, discussed in Chapter 5, within Aristophanes' competitive career is more ambiguous; the original play belongs squarely within his rivalry with Cratinus (it was placed third in competition with *Pytine* at the City Dionysia of 423), but the surviving version represents Aristophanes' revisionary efforts some years later. My discussion focusses on the idea of revision as recontestation unifying the surviving *Clouds* and emphasizes the play's agonistic positioning against the new rivals in the second phase of Aristophanes' career. While attempts to identify features of the original and revision are at times unavoidable and in a few cases crucial for our understanding, they also serve a more holistic objective of showing how the play in the form we have it makes agonistic sense as a work of the 410s.

Along with considerations based on the different insights provided by the chosen plays, the other factor affecting my selection of primary texts is access to sufficient supporting didaskalic and related information about the conditions of an individual play's original performance to allow us

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[25] Throughout I use "epinician" in its familiar application to victory songs by Simonides, Pindar, Bacchylides, and victory epigrams, and "epinikian" for the broader ambience of victory celebration and commemoration.