

Introduction

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Postclassical Tragedy and the Theories of Decline

Aristophanes' *Frogs*, a comedy produced only months after Euripides' demise (405 BC), famously proclaims that tragedy died along with the great man. Euripides, Dionysus laments, is survived by incompetent youngsters, 'a thousand times more babbling' than him, but in essence good enough to piss once on the hallowed art and take their leave (*Ra.* 89–95). In Dionysus' opinion, the tragic genre could only have a future if Euripides was brought back from the dead.

Aristophanes' construction, to be sure, is laden with irony. Undoubtedly, the lines mentioned previously are 'a feeder for a joke', which has sometimes been taken too seriously.¹ The joke, however, is much more elaborate than a simple jibe at the likes of Iophon; it is integral to the comic poetics of *Frogs* – poetics of generic competition, that is, which aims, always in a humorous vein, to privilege comedy rather than to expostulate about the sorry state of current tragic plays.²

Frogs 'unexpectedly' ends up valorizing Aeschylus rather than Euripides; still, and this is crucial, the former's victory in the *agōn* ensues only *after* his own tragic mode has been debunked and every aesthetic principle discussed in the contest has been abandoned in favour of a hazy new criterion: Aeschylus prevails because he is presumed to be more beneficial to the polis. The paradox, of course, is crystal clear: how could Aeschylus' kind of tragedy possibly 'save the city' (*Ra.* 1501), if it has already been demystified as obsolete and out of touch with the common man, whom it is supposed to improve morally (*Ra.* 1502–3)?

¹ Csapo et al. 2014: 3. For the need to read the critical statements of comic playwrights ironically see Wright 2012.

² Sells 2012 makes a similar point regarding the generic poetics of *Frogs* examining the play's paratitular agenda.

In fact, the contest of *Frogs* evokes the first epirrhematic *agōn* of the *Clouds*. In the latter play, Worse Argument and Better Argument are mutually discredited as models of civic education – the former as cynical and immoral, the latter as admirable and reminiscent of better days, but still too archaic to suit modern society. In *Frogs*, Aeschylus and Euripides, two extremes in their own right, cancel each other out to the benefit of an implied middle option. This middle option is not Sophocles, as Aristotle would later suggest; ‘serious’ drama is dismissed *tout court*; Aristophanes’ comedy, and nothing else, emerges as the real *didaskalos* of the body politic. In *Frogs*, as elsewhere, Aristophanes is not deploring the supposed decline of tragedy so much as celebrating yet another triumph of comedy in the contest of genres.³ After all, in the scales of Aristophanes, tragedy had always been found wanting.

Be that as it may, the *Frogs* discourse was viewed both in ancient and in modern times as a legitimate encapsulation of the history of tragedy after the fifth century – namely, as the first piece of evidence attesting to the formulation of a tragic canon, which distinguished the three great poets of the fifth century (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides) from their lesser contemporaries and degenerate descendants.⁴ Nietzsche, too, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), to name but one notable modern case, sides unequivocally with Aristophanes’ perceived judgment, speaking of ‘wicked Euripides’, whose ‘sophistical dialectic’ killed the spirit of tragedy, and thus he was ultimately deserted by Dionysus.⁵ As Csapo et al. note (2014: 1–3), the ultimate modern origin of Nietzsche’s thesis, along with practically all other pejorative approaches to postclassical tragedy until the mid-twentieth century, was the ‘organic’ model for the history of Greek tragedy developed by the Schlegel brothers.⁶ This model, which was the result of misunderstanding Aristotle as much as Aristophanes, saw the fifth century, in biological terms, as the ‘bloom’ and the fourth as the ‘decay’ of the genre. The Schlegels’ approach was firmly rooted in Romanticism and German nationalism; when transplanted to Britain from late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, it was further enveloped by the nostalgia of an empire lost: for British theatre historians writing at the time of their own

³ On Aristophanic comedy and generic competition, see principally Bakola 2008; Biles 2011; Bakola, Prauscello and Telò 2013.

⁴ On classical plays being transformed ‘from repertoire to canon’, see Easterling 1997, Nervegna 2014, and the chapter by Duncan and Liapis in this volume.

⁵ Geuss and Speirs 1999: 54.

⁶ For a fresh view of Aristotle’s periodization of tragedy, esp. regarding where he put the dividing point between the tragedy of yore and the tragedy of ‘today’, see Carter this volume.

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empire's decay, the loss of Athenian hegemony coincided with the vanishing vitality of tragedy. In the 1950s and 1960s it was the Cold War and (mostly French) structuralism with their binary schemata that determined the critical agenda. The prevailing conviction of this time was that tragic drama was inextricably linked to the Athenian polis and Athenian democratic self-definition. The upshot of such a view was natural enough: as soon as the context of performances was changed (by exporting the plays to other cities), the real 'moment' of tragedy (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990) was gone.⁷

Until as late as the 1990s, serious scholars could still speak of post-classical theatre as plagued by 'crisis'.⁸ One had to wait for the new post-Cold War conditions to foster more appreciative perspectives on tragedy after the fifth century:

The current climate of free trade, the internet, and high levels of personal mobility have made scholarship much more ready to look for and accept evidence for a multicultural, interconnected and networked Mediterranean, where former generations noticed only cultural and economical isolation. We are also equipped with better tools to find evidence of interconnection. Cultural studies have become multidisciplinary, more receptive to complex models of cultural interaction, and far more sensitive to the interactivity of political, economic and cultural production. Indeed, the ancient theatre is a paradigmatic locus of both forms of interactivity, between cultures and within them.⁹

Nevertheless, deep-seated prejudice dies hard. For instance, even the monograph often credited for having redirected attention to postclassical tragedy, namely Xanthakis-Karamanos (1980), still brims with mixed perspectives, and for all its merits, it fails to dispense with the traditional myths. This book's laudable goal is to assess later tragedy more favourably, not as the unworthy heir to the throne, but as embodying a positive 'new direction', in response to the wider transformations of the period. However, despite assurances that 'tragedy was never cultivated with more enthusiasm than during the fourth century', or that 'the poetic value [of the new playwrights] should not be underestimated', the discourses of old still resonate in the author's assertion that the 'new direction' to which fourth-century tragedy turned brought about nothing short of 'the end of serious drama', which was now replaced by a so-called 'anti-tragedy'.

⁷ Cf. Csapo et al. 2014: 14–15: 'To say that theatre is Athenian in the fifth century but international in the fourth, and that its real function was Athenian self-definition, is effectively to say that in the fourth century it is an empty shell'.

⁸ See, for instance, Ghiron-Bistagne 1974; Kuch 1993. ⁹ Csapo et al. 2014: 17.

Xanthakis-Karamanos assumes – despite the fact that the remains of fourth-century drama are too scattered to support such sweeping generalizations – that fourth-century playwrights en bloc developed a strong taste for the rhetorical, the pathetic and the sensational, as well as for the carefully crafted romantic plot. In her view, the fourth century substituted ‘the highly tragic issues’ of fifth-century drama with little more than *pièces bien faites*, which brought about a ‘disintegration’ of that ‘perfect blending’ between speech, song and delivery achieved in classical tragedy. In departing ‘from the severity and purity of classic style’, the fourth century caused a gradual ‘withering’ of the ‘inner power of tragedy’. As it transpires, the ‘anti-tragedy’ theory, far from being a new, more approving hermeneutic model for understanding Greek tragedy after the fifth century, is practically a masked reformulation of Schlegel’s model of organic decline.

One needs to remind oneself constantly that evaluating postclassical tragic drama is ultimately a matter of critical perspectives and priorities,¹⁰ and, furthermore, that the perception of the fifth century as a period of unparalleled and unsurpassable grandeur was nothing if not a construction of fourth-century cultural agents (politicians, orators, philosophers, as well as dramatists):

It is the fourth century that canonised the fifth, exalted its poets as culture heroes and models [...]. Indeed, it could be said with some justice that fourth-century theatre was the parent of its parent. It selected, shaped and cultivated ‘fifth-century theatre’ precisely to serve as the greatest cultural bloom of the Classical era, and so we have received it. That it could do so is testimony to the immense power and importance of theatre in the fourth century. The way it did so is testimony to the ideals and values of fourth-century theatre, for fifth-century theatre is in an important sense, an artefact of the fourth century and cannot properly be understood unless we moderns acknowledge that, at least from our perspective, the shadow falls the other way.¹¹

Apart from its prejudicial character, the ‘decline’ narrative rests on inherently problematic historical premises. Proponents of this view refer to the notorious ‘death of the polis’ and the supposedly concomitant ‘decline in the political energy’ of theatre, which, as Xanthakis-Karamanos

¹⁰ Cf. Csapo et al. 2014: 6 and Easterling 1993: 568f: ‘For sensationalism, triviality, affectation and so on we ought perhaps to read elegance, sophistication, refinement, clarity, naturalism, polish, professionalism – a new kind of cosmopolitan sensibility deeply influenced by, and interacting with, the classical repertoire’.

¹¹ Csapo et al. 2014: 24.

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opines, resulted in the ascendancy of ‘melodrama’ in the fourth century. Melodrama, which Xanthakis-Karamanos equates with the aforementioned ‘anti-tragedy’, is imagined to have been more attractive to audiences in a period in which people were too weary of war and economic hardship to stomach ‘true tragedies’,¹² and in which an expanding theatre market demanded more exportable plays with lighter, more universal (i.e., not Athenocentric) themes. As current research has shown, however, this view is simply unhistorical. To start from the obvious, as evidenced by performances of Athenian drama outside Athens as early as the time of Aeschylus,¹³ exportability was never a problem in the case of tragedy, whose myths were already Panhellenic and whose specifically Athenian resonances, accentuated by the institutional and civic context rather than by the mythic material itself, could easily be redefined.¹⁴ More importantly, historians have demonstrated that despite the gradual formation of larger commonwealths in the course of the fourth century – especially, after the conquests of Alexander – the polis and its old institutions retained their significance as the fundamental framework of social organization and culture.¹⁵ Furthermore, research into none other than the supposedly ‘apolitical’ and ‘escapist’ Menander has shown convincingly that such dominant themes as marriage, procreation, gender or class may have been Panhellenic, and thus transposable to various contexts, but they could all remain pertinent to the Athenian polis itself.¹⁶ In other words, judging by Menander, fourth-century theatre could still be energetically polis-oriented, even if the polis was now increasingly integrated into larger political formations; it could still engage with civic ideology and the issues of polis life, even if the polis itself was no longer democratic; and, of course, it could still be relevant in and to Athens, even if its themes were transferrable to other socio-political milieux. Even Menander’s comedy, therefore, which scholars used to regard as mere light entertainment (being itself supposedly a token of decline compared to the Aristophanic political extravaganzas), has been revealed not to eschew the ‘serious issues’ and to engage dynamically with the hegemonic discourses of the polis. If this is so, then it would be rash to suppose, based on the little evidence we have, that

¹² Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 41. ¹³ See, for example, Dearden 1990, Boshier 2012a.

¹⁴ On exported plays in the postclassical period see Dearden 1999.

¹⁵ On the ‘death of the polis’ as a historiographical myth see, for example, Ma 2008 and, with especial reference to the theatre, Le Guen 1995. On Athenian civic ideology under the Macedonians and the Ptolemies, which pivoted on an obstinate preservation of the institutional framework of the polis, see Habicht 1998: 1–5.

¹⁶ See, for example, Lape 2004 and 2010.

the audiences of contemporary tragedy had lost their tolerance of and taste for ‘true tragedies’ or that politically minded (that is to say, polis-oriented) tragic narratives were exclusively reliant upon the supremacy of democratic Athens. The fact that fourth-century tragic theatre was now developing in new socio-political environments need not mean ‘the end of serious drama’.

Continuity and Change in Tragedy After the Fifth Century

The decline theory, and its cognate ‘anti-tragedy’ theory, both modern perpetuations of an ancient teleological myth and its Schlegelian avatar, are supported neither by the surviving texts nor by the archaeological record. The latter, in fact, categorically attests to the opposite, at least from a quantitative point of view: not only did interest in tragic performances *not* wane after the Peloponnesian War, but, quite the reverse, in the fourth century and increasingly in later periods, both tragedy and comedy knew a period of spectacular growth,¹⁷ which amounted to a veritable ‘cultural revolution’.¹⁸

The process of exporting Athenian theatre beyond the confines of Attica to be performed in the new-fangled religious and secular festivals multiplying everywhere¹⁹ accelerated to such an extent that by the third century BC Athens was merely one of many great hubs of theatrical activity, albeit arguably the most venerable still. The end of Athenocentrism in the fourth century was a universal phenomenon, which did not concern only the new performance venues. Theatre practitioners, too, including playwrights and actors, no longer exclusively (or almost exclusively) originate from Athens. Theatre is now a bona fide international form.

With theatre buildings of increasing grandeur and capacity²⁰ cropping up in every Hellenistic city aspiring to be considered a *polis* (Pausanias, 9.4.1); with an increasing number of rich and powerful patrons (monarchs no less) willing to finance theatrical activity; and with a buzzing trade of theatrical by-products (vase paintings, mosaics, wall paintings, terracotta figurines, masks, even scripts circulating in book form) echoing the performances, theatre became a staple of life throughout the Hellenistic world. The physical space of the theatre was now a locus of multiform

¹⁷ See Le Guen 2007 and this volume. See also Taplin 1999. ¹⁸ See Hall 2007.

¹⁹ On Hellenistic theatre festivals see Le Guen 2010 and this volume.

²⁰ On the evolution of the Hellenistic theatre building see generally Bieber 1961: 108–28, and Gogos 2008 with special reference to the controversial case of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens.

civic activity in the context of a new performance culture. From theatrical performances to paratheatrical and theatricalized political events, such as popular assemblies and public displays of magnificence and power by sovereigns,²¹ theatricality engulfed every aspect of public life, addressing audiences fully equipped to ‘read’ what they saw in minute semiotic detail.²² It even became a metaphor for the vicissitudes of human existence (*theatrum mundi*).²³

For their part, theatre practitioners were now well trained, specialized professionals,²⁴ generously rewarded both in financial terms and in the form of honours, privileges and other distinctions. Their histrionic talents were esteemed and sought after for purposes beyond the theatre: it was not uncommon, for example, for actors to be dispatched to serious diplomatic missions as ambassadors. In a remarkable feat, which surpassed even the organization of the Homeridae in the late Archaic and classical periods, by the beginning of the third century BC at the latest, actors became unionized. Their most important guild,²⁵ the ‘Artists of Dionysus’ (Διονυσιακοὶ Τεχνῖται), included all theatre practitioners; however, its internal structure was determined by a caste system, which distinguished, for instance, ‘protagonists’ from ‘deuteragonists’ (i.e., star actors from sideshows). The Artists were powerful institutions, exerting total control over theatrical activity, both in organizational and in artistic terms.²⁶ If Aristotle could complain about the power of actors in his own time (*Rhet.* 1403b33), he had seen nothing yet. For the actors’ superstardom did not manifest itself only in hefty fees and civic honours; actors also influenced the dramaturgy itself, by demanding or encouraging (or even concocting) parts that showcased their diverse skills in gestural language, emotional expression, vocal delivery, mimicry and singing. The mounting demand for theatrical spectacle also gave rise, alongside the traditional full-scale performances, to novel ways of performing tragedy, most prominently in an ‘anthological’ manner, that is, by performing extracts rather than the entire play, either

²¹ Chaniotis 1997 and more extensively 2009: 41–63, 103–40.

²² The point is elaborated in Petrides 2014: 107–13. ²³ See Kokolakis 1960.

²⁴ On the specialization of actors in postclassical theatre see Chaniotis 1990.

²⁵ Other guilds, beyond the Artists of Dionysus, also developed over time, such as τὸ Κοινὸν τῶν περὶ τὴν ἰλαρὴν Ἀφροδίτην τεχνιτῶν, which probably comprised mimes; on this organization see Fountoulakis 2000, Aneziri 2000–1.

²⁶ On the actors’ unions, the standard reference works are Le Guen 2001 and Aneziri 2003. Cf. also Aneziri 1997, 2001–2; Lightfoot 2002; Le Guen 2004a, 2004b. A complete prosopography of the Technitai is compiled by Stephanis 1988.

in public or in private occasions hosted by the elite.²⁷ Even the texts of the ‘old tragedies’ – fifth-century tragedies now enjoying the status of canonical works – did not remain untouched by the force of star actors. As the state of our texts evinces, it was not uncommon for actors, who were now both the protagonists and the producers of ‘old tragedies’, to boost their roles (e.g., by protracting some *rhēseis* (set speeches) or by introducing more extensive lyric parts that afforded them further opportunities for virtuoso singing).²⁸

As for the play scripts, the three major tragic playwrights of the fifth century, especially Euripides,²⁹ had enjoyed the status of classic authors already since the beginning of the fourth century. The existence of such a canon is evident in Aristotle (e.g., *Poet.* 1449a15–18, 1453a23–30, 1460b33), who may have recognized the odd flash of brilliance in contemporary plays, for example, in Astydamos’ *Alcmeon* (*Poet.* 1453b29 = *TrGF* 60 F 1b), which he juxtaposed to the quintessential *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles. Nonetheless, Aristotle, apparently in the belief that *Oedipus* marks the *telos* (the goal towards which the genre strove) and the perfect *physis* (the definitive nature) of tragedy, could not but regard everyone and everything that came after as stages of a slow decline. Canonization hinged not only on the genuine popular admiration for the commonly acknowledged figureheads of the tragic genre, but also on political and psychological factors. It must be no accident that the Peace of Antalcidas (386 BC), which ended the so-called Corinthian War unfavourably for Athens, coincided with the introduction, albeit *hors concours*, of performances of ‘old tragedy’ in the Great Dionysia.³⁰ This and the other grave military setbacks that befell the Athenians in the course of the fourth century – namely, the humiliation at the so-called Social War (357–355 BC), which resulted in the disbandment of the Second Athenian Confederacy,³¹ and the crushing defeat at Chaeronea by Philip II of Macedon (338 BC), which signalled the end of Athenian political autonomy³² – enveloped the cultural and political might of fifth-century Athens with a nostalgic aura.

²⁷ On the different methods of consuming theatre in the Hellenistic period, see Gentili 1979a, Jones 1991, Nervegna 2007.

²⁸ On actors’ interpolations and their detrimental effect on the texts of the plays see Page 1934, Hamilton 1974, Garzya 1981, Mastronarde 1994: 39–49. On the overall process that secured the survival of Greek tragedy see Garland 2004.

²⁹ Lauriola and Demetriou 2015 set out much of the convoluted story of Euripides’ reception in antiquity and in modern times. See also Easterling 1994, Revermann 1999–2000.

³⁰ On the institution of *παλαιὰ τραγωδία* see Katsouris 1974, Hanink 2015.

³¹ On the Peace of Antalcidas and the Social War see Cawkwell 2005: 175–97.

³² On Chaeronea see Cawkwell 1978.

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The statesman Eubulus' decision, soon after the Social War, to use the budget surplus in order to enhance public festivals³³ and, much more decisively, the activities of Lycurgus in the 330s BC provide evidence that, just as fast as it was losing its political influence, Athens was reinventing herself as the metropolis of Greek culture. The clear material *presence* of the three great tragedians – of classical grandeur itself – was a big part of this project of Athenian self-reimagining. This presence was impressed upon popular conscience in the 330s, on the initiative of Lycurgus, in two ways: first, by erecting their statues as visual markers of an unsurpassable standard to be revered in the refurbished Theatre of Dionysus (which Lycurgus had remade in stone to increase its audience capacity);³⁴ and second, by the preparation of an official state edition of the *oeuvres complètes* of 'the Big Three' to be cherished as a communal heirloom.³⁵

However, it was not just the old plays that enjoyed the limelight in the postclassical era – far from it: the production of 'new tragedies' (καινὰ τραγωδία) swelled like never before, as the market was gradually being globalized. As early as the middle of the fourth century BC, the most successful playwrights of the day, such as Astydamos (*TrGF* 60), are reported to have produced twice, sometimes even three times as many plays as their fifth-century colleagues.³⁶ The coexistence of new plays alongside the 'classics' in a variety of performance modes, as mentioned previously, but also in book form,³⁷ created conditions of both osmosis and creative antagonism between fifth- and fourth-century tragedy. The influence of Euripides (and Aeschylus, albeit to a lesser extent) on the new plays was paramount, but the push for innovation in plot, diction and performance never waned.

Consequently, the death of Euripides was not 'the end of an era'³⁸ at all, in the sense of marking the death of theatre or even of tragedy as we

³³ On the statesman Eubulus, who dominated Athenian politics in the years 355–342 BC, see OCD⁴ *s.v.*

³⁴ On the Lycurgan Theatre of Dionysus see Papastamati-von Mook 2014.

³⁵ On Lycurgus' edition see Scodel 2007 and also Duncan and Liapis, this volume; on his general contribution to 'the making of classical tragedy' see Hanink 2014.

³⁶ These numbers may be exaggerated, but the difference is still telling: Astydamos is attributed 240 plays, whereas Sophocles is given 123 and Euripides around 90. See Liapis and Stephanopoulos, this volume.

³⁷ On literacy, education and the gradual spread of book culture in the classical and early Hellenistic period see Kenyon 1951; W.V. Harris 1989: 65–115, 139–46; Robb 1994: 214–51 (on the fourth century in particular); Yunis 2003 (on the 'emergence of the critical reader').

³⁸ The myth of Euripides' demise as an 'end of an era' is forcefully debunked by Easterling 1993.

know it. The tragic genre continued to develop and even thrive in the fourth century and, in many cases, later. Theatre continued to be practiced and followed enthusiastically, plays were written and produced with increased vitality, and were even perhaps possessed of comparable quality and staying power: not a few fourth-century plays (e.g., Astydamos' *Hector* and *Parthenopaeus*, Theodectas' *Lynceus*) acquired the status of classics in their own right, alongside the masterworks of the previous, 'golden' era. Periodization, after all, is always a tricky venture, which can obfuscate simple truths:³⁹ as Francis Dunn's and David Carter's chapters in this volume show, in postclassical times there was significant *continuity* as well as change in the tragic genre, both as an artistic form and as an ideological ('educational') platform of the polis.⁴⁰ Continuity in tragedy was perhaps even stronger than in comedy, which reinvented itself much more drastically during its evolutionary course through the fourth century.

Nonetheless, even having done away with misleading paradigms, scholars of Greek tragedy after the fifth century continue to face the serious challenge of trying to determine the value of the evidence at hand. Not the least of their problems is that centuries of bias and bad methodology are encapsulated in the critical terminology itself. Pejorative semantics still insinuate themselves into scholarly discourse, for example, through the use of such terminology as *tragicci minores* to refer collectively to any tragedian, from the fifth century or later, beyond the 'Big Three'.⁴¹ The issue, of course, is not one of nomenclature but one of substance. The very term *postclassical* is problematic, even if used non-qualitatively, as in this volume and elsewhere in recent years: the negative suggestions of epigonism that the term carries weigh heavily on whatever is 'coming after' the great classical past⁴² – be it fourth-century tragedy, comedy, or 'Hellenistic' literature at large.

Among other negative upshots, in such metadiscursive situations, which brand a whole section of the past as an a priori inferior carryover, the tendency to fit everything into prefabricated interpretive moulds is almost reflexive. Let one suggestive example suffice. Discussing the so-called Gyges fragment (*TrGF* 2 F 664 = P. Oxy 2382), which is now commonly

³⁹ On the general questions concerning periodization and ancient culture see Golden and Toohey 1997.

⁴⁰ This is emphasized also by Kuch 1993, although he continues to entertain the idea of postclassical tragedy's 'decreased political commitment' due to 'the city-state's relatively limited possibilities at the time' (p. 548).

⁴¹ This time-honoured but misleading practice is followed even in the latest edition of *TrGF*.

⁴² On 'coming after' see Hunter 2008: 8–26.