

INTRODUCTION

PINDAR AND AESCHYLUS IN DIALOGUE

Imagining a Conversation

This book is an attempt to imagine a conversation between two fifth-century poets, Pindar and Aeschylus. I am not sure if such a conversation ever took place. If it did, it could have happened in Sicily, at Hieron's court in Syracuse where both Pindar and Aeschylus were hired to commemorate the tyrant's rule around 470 BCE,¹ or in Kamarina or Akragas, or in Gela, where Aeschylus is said to have spent his final days.² Or it could have occurred in Athens, the city for which Aeschylus so bravely fought at Marathon and whose citizens, it is said, honored him through the posthumous performance of his tragedies, despite his burial in Sicily.³ Pindar too owed a great debt to the city of Athens, or so the anonymous biographical tradition tells us, for it was there that he learned his trade as a poet and first received acclaim for his dithyrambic compositions.⁴ It might have been during those formative years, when the two young poets were still honing their skills, that they first sat down to talk shop. Other places and other times cannot be ruled out – Aegina, Cyrene, Thebes – but, admittedly, these locations offer less material with which to fantasize. Where and when we

¹ On the poetic vitality of Hieron's court, see Morgan 2015: 87–132.

² The ancient biographical accounts are unanimous on this subject. For discussion, see Lefkowitz 1981: 75–6, Sommerstein 1996: 8, and now Poli-Palladini 2013: 267–84 (and *passim* on Aeschylus' career in Gela).

³ According, at least, to the ancient *Vitae*. On the notoriously unreliable character of the ancient biographical tradition, see Lefkowitz 1981, Fairweather 1984, Kivilo 2010. Biles 2006 raises compelling doubt regarding the posthumous honors.

⁴ *Vita Ambr.* 1.11–16, 2.1 Drachmann, *Vita Thom.* 5.17, 6.1–3 Drachmann; cf. POxy 2438.8–10; see also the discussions of Hubbard 2001 and Hornblower 2004: 248–61.

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choose to situate the exchange between our poets is, however, largely irrelevant. The goal of this book is simply to imagine that a conversation between Pindar and Aeschylus did take place – that it did not *not* happen, to borrow an idiom used in performance studies to which I will repeatedly return.

I adopt the conceit of a hypothetical conversation in part because it reminds us that Pindar and Aeschylus were indeed contemporaries. They worked in the same places at the same times. Their patrons and audiences were often the same. They are linked in a way that is indisputably, historically real. But this historical reality is tangential to the arguments that I pursue in this book. In fact, the comparative perspective undertaken here is intended as a deliberate departure from the overwhelmingly historicist bent of scholarship on Pindar and Aeschylus in recent decades.⁵ The so-called performative turn in Classics has brilliantly elucidated the importance of context and occasion – of *Sitz im Leben* – for understanding ancient song culture. But the study of performance, and performance history, is not exhausted by the detailed and sophisticated reconstruction of past events. My aim here is not to recreate a historical exchange between Pindar and Aeschylus, even one knowingly cast in suspicion by dutiful reminders of the partial and uncertain nature of our evidence. Imagined conversations were an important facet of the ancient literary-critical toolbox, well-known to modern scholars from texts such as Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, or Lucian's *Conversations with Hesiod*. Like the unabashedly fictionalized encounters recounted in those ancient works, what follows is, emphatically, not the transcript of an actual exchange. The conversation imagined here is not meant to be

⁵ I am hardly alone in recognizing the need for a methodology that is less markedly shaped by the political or social realities of the ancient world. Both Sigelman 2016 and Phillips 2016 articulate a kindred desire to engage something beyond historically directed interpretation in their analysis of Pindar's work, as does Gurd 2016 in his discussion of the auditory experience of archaic and classical song. I believe that similar motivations are found in the recent publications of Nooter 2017 and Spelman 2018, both of which reached me too late to be incorporated into the arguments presented here. I explore the potential drawbacks of historicist interpretation more fully in Uhlig 2018b, with reference to Alcaeus.

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a real one. Its complete and total inaccessibility – the fact that this event, if indeed it ever took place, is entirely lost to all but the two participants – is part of its allure. The point is neither to know what was said (*wie es wirklich war*) nor to ground speculation in the reassurances of historical plausibility and verifiable facts. Pindar and Aeschylus may well have exchanged political views regarding developments in Athens or Syracuse, or gossiped about the whims of patrons and audiences in those places or elsewhere. It is not implausible to imagine that they compared notes on Stesichorus' *Oresteia*, a work that clearly influenced both poets. But these are not the conversations that I seek to imagine in this book. My goal in joining Pindar's and Aeschylus' voices in dialogue is to try to hear something beyond direct poetic correspondence or isolated moments of interaction. It is a conversation about how Pindar and Aeschylus approached what modern scholars have come to call *performance*, a broadly conceived notion which finds no true correlate in Pindar's and Aeschylus' time, but which the Greeks of the fifth century might have called *mousike*, the live and living expression of choral song.⁶

Before turning to the content of Pindar and Aeschylus' imagined exchange, I would like to make a little more space for thinking about how their meeting might have taken place. My fantasy conversation is grounded in a simple premise: that Pindar and Aeschylus shared something. This notion is hardly controversial. Yet for many scholars the features that distance these two poets may be more compelling than those that bring them together.⁷ Coincidentally (or not), the scholarly tendency to prioritize contrasts over continuities maps neatly onto the likely coordinates of the poets' hypothetical encounter. For, while Sicily and Athens are the two sites that most convincingly link these two poets in our ancient testimonia, they are also sites that contemporary scholars have come to associate with a segregated treatment of Pindar's and Aeschylus' lives and work. In the

⁶ The idea of *mousike* is well explored by Murray and Wilson 2004.

⁷ Finley 1955 represents a particularly overt example. More recently, see e.g. Nagy 2000, Kurke 2013.

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socio-politically determined landscape of contemporary classical studies, Sicily, the home of powerful tyrants and autocratic dynasties, has come to symbolize Pindar's reactionary celebration of the aristocracy. The democratic city of Athens, by contrast, serves as the perfect frame for the egalitarian and progressive views of its homegrown playwright and hero, Aeschylus. Actual scholarship on the socio-political import of Pindar's and Aeschylus' work is, of course, far subtler than this simplistic geographic binary can reflect. When viewed on their own, both authors are treated to sophisticated socio-political analysis, for example, in Mark Griffith's or Simon Goldhill's work on Aeschylus and Leslie Kurke's, Kathryn Morgan's, or Lucia Athanassaki's studies of Pindar.⁸ Nor is the segregation of these two poets universally maintained, as exemplified by the inclusive perspective of Deborah Steiner, who consistently approaches these two authors as true contemporaries and whose insights and methodology inform my thinking throughout this book.⁹ Nevertheless, the idea that Pindar and Aeschylus belong to different spheres, different epochs almost, is a tacit assumption that guides a striking amount of modern scholarship on both authors.

Why, then, does modern scholarship continue to segregate these contemporary poets? The differences between Pindar and Aeschylus may be cast in terms of "political outlook," "socio-political status," and/or "performance context," and attending to these important features has produced a wide range of excellent scholarship over the past decades. But, to a certain degree, these finer distinctions can all be traced to the one glaring feature that separates these two poets: the difference in form between Pindar's "lyric poems" and Aeschylus' "tragedies." Of course, striking formal differences do not preclude sympathetic comparison, as Simon Hornblower's study of Pindar and Thucydides makes clear.¹⁰ Yet distinctions of

⁸ I am thinking particularly of Griffith 1995 and Griffith 1999; Goldhill 1986 and Goldhill 2000; Kurke 1991; Morgan 2015; Athanassaki 2003; and Athanassaki 2011.

⁹ Especially Steiner 1994 and Steiner 2001; see also, recently, Grethlein 2010 who looks at fifth-century texts from a variety of genres as expressions of a newly emerging relationship to the past.

¹⁰ Hornblower 2004.

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genre, which hold sway over contemporary approaches to all of our surviving ancient Greek texts, prove stubbornly sticky in the case of Pindar and Aeschylus. When contemporary scholars do think of these two poets together, it tends to be precisely because of their generic differences, and as a means for better understanding the features that distinguish their work. The handful of occasions when both poets take up the same mythical narratives have served as a touchstone in this regard. Beyond the inevitable speculation as to whether Pindar influenced Aeschylus or the other way around, scholars have sought to identify the role of genre in shaping, and more importantly differentiating, the poets' distinctive treatment of their shared material. The stories of Orestes' matricide (told by Pindar in his P. 11 and Aeschylus in *Choephoroi*) and of the Argive expedition against Thebes (which Pindar treats in P. 8 and N. 9 and Aeschylus in *Seven Against Thebes*) have been singled out by scholars to emphasize the structural divisions between "epinician" and "tragedy" or "drama" and "lyric."¹¹ There can be no doubt that the two poets' approaches to these narratives differ in many respects, and generic analysis has proved a fruitful means of juxtaposing these works. At the same time, analysis based on genre predisposes a contrastive view of Pindar and Aeschylus, privileging certain formal/contextual characteristics at the expense of others. In order to hear a more harmonious conversation between these poets, the siren song of generic categorization has to be muted to some degree.

There are many good reasons to be skeptical of genre, a means of categorization that is famously difficult to define and identify, and all the more so when it comes to ancient Greek poetry.¹² But I am less concerned with the accuracy of modern scholarly taxonomies than with the disproportionate weight

¹¹ On Orestes, Finglass 2007: 11–17, Kurke 2013. On Thebes, Nagy 2000, Griffiths 2014: 736–8, Foster 2017. Poli-Palladini 2016: 36–47 explores the possible influences of Pindar's Athenian dithyrambs on Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

¹² For an overview of the range of modern definitions of genre, see e.g. Duff 2000. On the difficulties attendant in identifying ancient categories, see the classic study of Davies 1988 as well as Depew and Obbink 2000, Ford 2006.

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that they are currently allotted in our critical outlook. By way of illustration, I offer an example from more recent history, though one taken not entirely at random. In the golden age of Hollywood cinema, films were conceived along the lines of well-formulated genres. Westerns had horses and gunfights, musicals had showy costumes and elaborately choreographed dances, “women’s pictures” were brooding and languid. And yet, who would say that we can discuss any of them properly without speaking about “film?” We would miss the forest for the trees. The importance of this larger category is underlined by F. Scott Fitzgerald, as he reflected on his own experience as a writer trying to make it in Hollywood in his final, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*. At the outset of the novel, one of the characters marvels at the feat achieved by the handful of men, “no more than half a dozen,” who “have ever been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads.”¹³ “Pictures” – the catch-all term for film at the time – is a notion that goes beyond the ready distinctions of genre; it gestures to the collective endeavor of those working in a place, both real and imagined, called Hollywood. Its totality – the “whole equation” as Fitzgerald calls it – is a thing that can be understood “only dimly and in flashes.”¹⁴ But the reality, and importance, of film as a category writ large is not diminished by the impossibility of comprehending it.

The spirit of Fitzgerald’s “whole equation” is what motivates my desire to listen for continuities and unexpected harmonies in (different types of) choral song rather than to reinforce the distinctions with which we are accustomed to parcel these songs into discrete spheres. Although this book is by no means an attempt at a comprehensive account of the world of Greek song in the fifth century BCE, it does aspire to describe (albeit “dimly and in flashes”) something shared in one very small corner of this world. In fact, this book does not even offer a comprehensive map of this imagined landscape, a space no

¹³ Fitzgerald 1994: 3; see also the discussion in Thomson 2004: 18–22, to which my citation of the passage is indebted.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald 1994: 3. The same notion seems to inform the Coen brothers’ 2016 *Hail, Caesar!*

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larger than was needed to contain two poets at the same time. Rather than attempting to exhaust the possibilities of a comparative analysis of Pindar and Aeschylus, I focus on one particular strand of their commonality, namely the way that both poets use their songs to explore the idea of performance. What follows, then, is a description of how Pindar and Aeschylus give a distinctive shape to the voices and bodies within their compositions in order to reflect on the practice of choral performance – of creating a world of song *with* voices and bodies. This conversation represents a strand of what John Herington famously identified as a broadly conceived “song culture,” linking the disparate choral voices of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.¹⁵ At the same time, the highly circumscribed nature of this study, focusing only on a handful of illustrative passages from two poets amongst many, does not constitute a comprehensive claim about choral song in its totality. It is, rather, a provocation, with ample space for many more voices and imagined encounters.

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The song culture of late sixth- and early fifth-century Greece that Herington describes, and in which I situate Pindar and Aeschylus, is one in which genre is not definitive. One can still, correctly, call Pindar a “lyric” or “epinician” poet and Aeschylus a “dramatic” or “tragic” one. But far more important is the fact that both are “choral”, or “melic”, poets,¹⁶ working in a broad tradition of complex song-making that was, from what our limited evidence indicates, undergoing a process of radical transformation in nearly every quarter.¹⁷ The unsettled landscape of the choral world in this period redefined the nature of performance. The precise character and attributes of the changes remain murky, and the local manifestations of shifts in the broader song culture took strikingly different forms. But

¹⁵ Herington 1985.

¹⁶ I use the terms “choral” and “melic” interchangeably. On the complex history of this terminology, see Budelmann 2009: 2–4, with bibliography.

¹⁷ Herington 1985, Kowalzig 2013, Csapo 2013.

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the effects can be traced throughout the Greek Mediterranean. Returning to the analogy of twentieth-century Hollywood suggested by Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, the invention of "talkies," which fundamentally restructured the world of film in the 1930s, may not be an exact analogue, but it is not so wide of the mark. By extension, and without wanting to push this potentially helpful correspondence beyond its limits, we might think of the texts under consideration here along the lines of the 1952 MGM Gene Kelly masterpiece *Singing in the Rain*. This nostalgic story about the introduction of sound to moving pictures, written and filmed some decades after the fact, offers a historically informed and acutely self-conscious meditation on the technological developments that make its own existence – a technicolor production built around elaborate song and dance numbers – possible. It is, perhaps inevitably, a film at once so generically heterodox as to be almost unclassifiable and unambiguously a "musical." The works of Pindar and Aeschylus may not present us with anything like the explicitly historical self-dramatization of *Singing in the Rain*, but the passages on which I focus in this book all contain something of the film's spirit of trans-generic self-reflection. They too are shaped by an interest in the shared conventions and new techniques that underpin the "whole equation" of a common endeavor.

Hollywood's invention of "talkies" may be a good model for thinking about the broad effects that disruptive innovation can produce, but it also reminds us that both Pindar and Aeschylus find themselves in the same post-innovation period. Until relatively recently, scholars have mainly treated the many overt similarities between tragedy and lyric as the result of generic evolution. The new dramatic forms of the late sixth century BCE, of which tragedy was the prime example, were thought to have developed out of the lyric tradition that they would soon displace. This disposition led many scholars to treat lyric texts as in some way prior to tragic ones, mirroring the presumed development of tragedy out of lyric.¹⁸ Compelling though

¹⁸ Bassi 1998: 1–3 offers a compelling critique of the scholarly compulsion towards a "story of origins" for Attic drama.

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this teleological narrative may be, and it has proved perversely resilient over the span of centuries, there is, simply put, no evidence to support it.

The sixth-century origins of drama remain intractably obscure. The earliest dramatic texts that we have date to a period when tragedy was already well-established in its own right. Based on the record now available to us, there is simply no way to know what factors influenced the development of the choral forms classed under the heading of “drama” or to confidently reconstruct the shape taken by the forerunners of the forms that we know.¹⁹ Our ignorance of sixth-century dramatic and proto-dramatic poetry is matched by an almost equal ignorance of the non-dramatic choral poetry of the period. With the exception of Alcman’s distinctively Spartan songs from the seventh century, we have virtually no record of the elaborate choral forms such as dithyramb, paean, partheneion, or threnos – the forms from which drama is presumed to have developed – that dates to before the end of the sixth century.²⁰ Despite the limited evidence, and the fact that there can, by definition, be no firm proof of their suppositions, scholars have recently begun to interpret this evidentiary silence as an indication that non-dramatic poetry underwent significant changes during the period, evolving into new forms alongside dramatic counterparts.²¹ It may well be that our inability to find antecedents for so many of the choral forms that came to dominance in the fifth century stems from their relative novelty. This provocative and compelling speculation informs the work that I undertake in this book. Nevertheless, the conversation that I will try to trace is a distinctly fifth-century affair, free from overt concerns about origins or evolution. One aim of setting the work of Pindar and Aeschylus together is to acknowledge,

¹⁹ Recent discussions include Rusten 2006, Csapo and Miller 2007, Csapo 2013.

²⁰ On the problem of generic identification, particularly with respect to choral vs. solo performance, in the archaic period see Davies 1988, Cingano 2003. The particularly problematic status of Stesichorus’ works is discussed by Carey 2015: 52–6, who argues in favor of choral performance, and West 2015: 78–80, who argues against it.

²¹ See e.g. D’Angour 1997, Porter 2007, Prauscello 2012, Kowalzig 2013.

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indeed to celebrate, the fact that our understanding of both dramatic and non-dramatic choral poetry is derived from evidence dating to a period in which both forms, whatever their origins, were already in full flower. The shared spaces and trans-generic commonalities pursued in this study arise from a desire to abide by the structures of a historical record in which nearly all forms of choral song are stubbornly contemporary.²²

The historical contemporaneity of choral forms is not only matter of chronology. It is, rather, a dialogue that makes itself felt in the songs themselves. As Laura Swift and others have explored in detail, dramatic compositions readily incorporate terminology and phrasing from non-dramatic forms, whether it be the singing of a choral paean or the invocation of epinician structures and formulae.²³ These allusions to other choral forms are not evocations of an idealized lyric past. There was no pre-lapsarian period of choral purity before tragedy, as was often alleged, confused all of the genres.²⁴ Nor, as Pauline LeVen has made comprehensively clear, did non-dramatic choral poetry cease to matter once actors took to the stage.²⁵ Rather, the generic polyphony of tragedy marks an active dialogue with forms of choral song that remained very much alive and vital throughout the fifth century and beyond. The interdependence is conspicuously marked in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, our earliest fully extant example of explicit dramatic criticism. When Aristophanes' Dionysus accuses Aeschylus of pilfering his songs from rope-haulers, the playwright rejects the low-brow implications of the insult, but not the basic premise that his plays, and those of his competitors and successors, drew on a wide range of other types of choral song (*Ran.* 1297–1303). For a late fifth-century theater audience, there could be

²² Ley 2007: 181 rightly notes that “[t]he origins of the *choroi* performed in the theater of Dionysus may be intriguing, but the fact remains that we must study them as comparative forms, much as the Athenians watched them.”

²³ Swift 2010, see also e.g. Rutherford 1994–5, Calame 1994–5, and most recently the contributions to Andujar et al. 2018.

²⁴ Ford 2002: 250–71 provides an excellent account of how fourth-century critics developed a regimented structure of genre that was then anachronistically applied to earlier practice.

²⁵ LeVen 2014.