PART ONE

The art of the actor

CHAPTER ONE

The singing actors of antiquity

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the fifth century AD Augustine confesses to having sometimes neglected the spiritual content of the psalms of David because he has been distracted – even moved to tears – by the beauty of the voices he has heard singing them. Augustine therefore approves of the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius, who attempted to protect his congregation's spiritual purity by instructing 'the reader of the psalm to sound it forth with such slight vocal modulation (*flexu vocis*) that it was nearer to speaking than to singing' (*Conf.* 10.33).

Augustine's supposedly shameful passion for vocal music had been fed by his successful participation, as a young pagan, in theatrical singing competitions (*Conf.* 4.2). He recalls a solo he used to sing entitled *The Flying Medea* (*Medea volans*, 3.6). The tragic theme implies that Augustine performed in costume and with gestures as a *tragoedus* or *tragicus cantor* (a 'tragic singer').[1] We do not know whether this aria was composed in the first person, requiring the singer to impersonate Medea as she flew, but it was certainly much performed (4.3). Augustine's testimony opens a fascinating window on the late Roman theatre, where famous songs on mythical themes were still being sung by expert singers, more than eight centuries since the first actor to impersonate Euripides' Medea had flown off to Athens in the chariot borrowed from the Sun. In antiquity, when our modern genres of musical theatre, opera and the musical, had not yet been invented, but which relished expert singing to a degree unsurpassed by music lovers today, the relationship of the art of acting to the art of singing was often inextricable. This chapter leads into the book's reappraisal of the profession of the ancient player via an unorthodox but illuminating route, which traces the history

[1] If he could play the cithara *Medea volans* just might have been a 'citharoedic' performance (Kelly (1979) 27–8).

of the singing actor from democratic Athens to beyond Augustine's day.

This story is co-extensive with ancient theatrical activity, which can still be documented at Epidauros and Athens in the late fourth century AD, and at Aphrodisias as late as the seventh.[2] Theatrical singers are attested from tragedies of Thespis in the sixth century BC to the Byzantine theatres in which Theodora performed in the sixth century AD, when the word 'tragedy' gave rise to what is still the word for 'song' in the Greek language (*tragoudi*, see Puchner, this volume). Vocal performances thrilled audiences not only across many centuries but also across a huge geographical area, for the Roman empire saw theatres built from Britain and western Portugal to North Africa and the far east of modern Turkey. Even some small cities had an Odeion in addition to one or more theatres (on the fascinating graffiti depicting performers drawn on the Odeion at Aphrodisias see further Roueché, this volume). It is revealing that in the second century AD Pausanias says that one reason Panopeus scarcely deserves to be called a city is because it had no theatre at all (10.4.1); two centuries later, when Eunapius wants to illustrate the primitivism of some Spanish barbarians, he portrays their astonishment at the singing of a travelling tragic actor (see below, 'Conclusion').

Although it is fashionable to stress that the ancient Greek and Latin words for a theatrical audience (*theatai*, *spectatores*) prioritised the act of watching, many ancient authors acknowledge the importance of the aural impact of drama on the 'spectator'. The discussion of tragedy in Aristophanes' *Frogs* focuses extensively on music and rhythm, Plato disapprovingly refers to spectators' sympathy with heroes 'delivering long speeches or singing (*aidontas*) and beating themselves' (*Rep.* 10.605c10–e2), Aristotle regards songwriting (*melopoiia*) as a more significant source of tragic pleasure than the visual dimension (*Poet.* 1450b15–18, see Sifakis, this volume), and Plutarch describes the experience of watching tragedy as 'a wonderful *aural* and visual experience'.[3]

The solo singing voice was particularly associated with Greek tragedy. Early tragic actors' roles may have consisted almost entirely of singing;[4] by Hellenistic times the Athenian guild of actors worshipped Dionysus under the title 'Melpomenos' (see Lightfoot, this volume), and

[2] See Green (1994a) 161–2.

[3] θαυμαστὸν ἀκρόαμα καὶ θέαμα (*On the Renown of the Athenians* 5 = *Mor.* 348c). By the end of the fourth century AD, when tragic songs had become dissociated from staged production, it is natural to Jerome to refer in his commentary on Ezechiel to the pleasure of people 'who *listen to* either tragic or comic actors' (*vel tragoedos audiunt vel comoedos*, 10. 33, 23–33, Migne, *PL* vol. 25 (1845) col. 326).

[4] In the earliest extant tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians*, King Xerxes' entire role is in song or recitative (Hall (1996a) 169), and it is just possible that some truth lies behind the statement in Philostratus

Melpomene, the muse who represented tragedy, derived her name from the same basic verb meaning 'sing'.[5] But the singing voice was heard in all the other types of ancient drama and their adaptations – satyr play, Old Comedy, Greek and Roman New Comedy, Atellan farce,[6] Roman tragedy, virtuoso recitals of excerpts from old dramas, pantomime, mime,[7] and such curiosities as Philoxenus' *Cyclops*, a lighthearted work on a mythical theme for two solo singers and an aulete, which has been compared with a chamber opera.[8] There were also innumerable sub-theatrical entertainers whose acts involved singing, including jugglers (Theophr. *Char.* 27.7), the hilarodes and Simodes who sang risqué parodies of highbrow musical compositions, and the magodes who banged cymbals and drums while impersonating such figures as a drunk singing a serenade.[9] Nor did theatrical singers confine their art to theatres: *tragōidoi*, for example, are found performing on board Alcibiades' trireme when he returned from exile in 408 BC (Duris, *FGrH* 76 F 70), at the five-day wedding celebrations of Alexander the Great at Susa (Chares, *FGrH* 125 F 4), and at symposia throughout antiquity from Macedonia to Mauretania.[10]

TRAGEDY IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

Tragedy developed in what Herington stressed was 'a song culture'.[11] Many fifth-century spectators of drama will themselves have sung at one of the several Athenian festivals where fifty-strong choruses of men and

that it was Aeschylus who invented spoken dialogue (*antilexeis*) for the actors, 'discarding the long monodies of the earlier time' (*Life of Apollonius* 6.11).

5 It probably has implications for the way tragedy was being performed by late antiquity that on artefacts Melpomene represents tragedy in contrast to Pol(h)ymnia, the new muse of pantomime (see further below). On a third-century Roman mosaic at Elis there are images symbolising all nine muses, including Melpomene, Thalia and Polymnia, who are represented by theatrical masks: see Yalouris (1992). On a fourth-century silver casket found on the Esquiline these theatrical muses are depicted holding their masks (Jory (1996) 12–13 and figs. 7 and 9).

6 In Petronius, *Sat.* 53 Trimalchio says he had bought a troupe of professional (Greek) comic actors but compelled them to perform Atellan farces and his *choraules* (see below n. 69) to sing in Latin: *malui illos Atellaniam facere, et choraulen meum iussi Latine cantare.*

7 See e.g. the canticum from the mime *The Silphium Gatherer* (*Laserpiciarius Mimus*), sung in a foul voice (*taeterrima voce*) by Trimalchio at his dinner party (Petronius *Sat.* 35, Bonaria (1965) 81). Although it has been argued that Greek mime did not involve much use of music (Cunningham (1971) 5), it is difficult to see what other genre the so-called 'Charition mime' might belong to, and it is preserved on a papyrus (*P Oxy.* 413, edited in Grenfell and Hunt (1903)) which may well have been a musician's copy: it contains signs at several points which are almost certainly instructions to play percussion instruments and probably *auloi* (see *GLP* 338–9).

8 *PMG* frr. 815–24. See Arist. *Poet.* 1448a14–16, West (1992a) 366.

9 See Maas (1927) and Hunter, this volume.

10 See Easterling (1997d) and Easterling, this volume.

11 Herington (1985) 3–10.

boys competed.[12] The Athenians knew many songs by heart – hymns, songs to congratulate athletes and military victors, processional songs, drinking songs, work songs, lullabies, medical and magical incantations, and songs to mark courtship, marriage, birth, and death. They sang them more often than modern individuals whose personal repertoire scarcely extends beyond *Happy Birthday* and *Auld Lang Syne* can possibly imagine. Many songs in tragedy (and comedy, see below) are derived from one of these pre-existing genres of 'ritual' or 'activity' song and are in the lyric metres appropriate to them. But tragedy's material was mostly drawn from the world of myth, inherited, rather, from epics and from choral lyrics, especially those of Stesichorus.

Tragic poetry is 'adorned with various rhythms and includes a wealth of metres', observed the Byzantine scholar Psellus.[13] Tragedy's innovation was to *integrate* genres into a complicated artistic pattern: spoken verse alternated with various types of sung poetry, performed to the accompaniment of *auloi* by both a chorus and individual actors. The tragic actor made use of a metre long associated with marching armies, the 'recitative' anapaest, whose basic unit is repeated pairs of ⏑ ⏑ – . Anapaests predominate at times of physical movement, especially entrances and exits such as the airborne departure of Euripides' Medea. The anapaestic metre there indicates that Medea and Jason performed their interchange to *aulos* accompaniment in a rhythmical, semi-musical type of vocal delivery, in antiquity designated by the verb *katalegein*, and perhaps comparable with the intermediate form of enunciation later recommended to Christian psalmodists by Bishop Athanasius. Like rhapsodes and citharodes, the tragic actor also needed mastery over the dactylic hexameter, at least when impersonating mythical bards such as Thamyras or Amphion (see further Wilson, this volume). But in addition he had to perform new sung metres, especially the excited dochmiac (based on ⏑ – – ⏑ –). Dochmiacs make no appearance prior to tragedy and virtually disappear after it, but often characterise the genre's most emotionally lacerating moments.[14]

The actor of fifth-century tragedy had to sing in a variety of metres in rapid succession,[15] and to negotiate the delicate transitions between

[12] A thousand citizens will have performed every year at the City Dionysia in dithyrambic choruses alone, even before the tragic and comic choruses are taken into account (West (1992a) 17).

[13] ἡ τραγικὴ ποίησις διαφόροις τε ῥυθμοῖς κοσμουμένη καὶ μέτρα ποικίλα λαμβάνουσα (Dyck (1986) 21–4).

[14] West (1992a) 142.

[15] See e.g. Soph. *Philoctetes* 1169–1217 and the comments of West (1992a) 153. This skill would have been considered remarkable by Aristoxenus' day, when the emphasis on rhythmical intricacy had been superseded by a love of melody ([Plut.] *On Music* 1138B–C).

them: the shift between recitative and lyrics was regarded as particularly emotive ([Arist.] *Probl.* 19.6). Anapaestic and lyric verses repeatedly alternated with iambic trimeters, and these were spoken. Besides some important external evidence,[16] tragic poetry offers internal clues to the way in which the voice was being used; in iambics people constantly use such verbs as *legein* and *phrazein* in reference to their own speech and that of their interlocutors, whereas the semantic range referring to lyric utterance, which includes *melpein* and *aidein*, is quite different.[17]

Tragedy thus offered the dramatist a palette of vocal techniques with which to paint his sound pictures, and certain patterns can be discerned in the way that he handled them. Gods and slaves, for example, rarely sing lyrics in tragedy, but they do recite anapaests. Sophoclean leads all sing at moments of great emotion, female characters frequently sing, but middle-aged men in Aeschylus and Euripides (with the exception of distressed barbarians) prefer spoken rhetoric to extended lyrics.[18] This complex metrical and vocal prosopography was unprecedented. Athens invented tragedy at a time when it was staking claim to be the cultural leader of the Greek world, and it is possible, from a sociological angle, to view tragedy's appropriation of metres associated with other places as Athenian cultural imperialism manifested on the level of form.[19] But it is equally important to stress the *aesthetic* achievement represented by tragedy's elaborate design.

Expert singers, rhapsodes and citharodes, had been singing Greek myths long before the emergence of the specialist *tragōidos*: the *Iliad*, after all, opens 'Muse, sing (*aeide*) of the wrath of Achilles'. But the term *aeidein* demonstrates how close an affinity was perceived between the performances of the epic and the tragic singer, for together with its cognates *aeidein* provided many of the basic words for 'singing' both epic and drama in Greek literature, and formed the second half of the compounds denoting almost all specialist singers, including *kitharōidos*, *tragōidos* and *kōmōidos*. Etymologically related to *aeidein* are both *audē* (the human voice, endowed with speech), and *aēdōn*, 'nightingale', a bird whose plaintive song brought it into association with lachrymose women from Penelope of the *Odyssey* onwards (19.518–23). But it was with female

[16] Two important passages in Aristotle associate the iambic metre with speech (*Poet.* 1449a19–28, *Rhet.* 3.1408b24–6); in Lucian's caricatures of *tragōidoi*, he complains that the performers contemporary with him 'even' sing their iambics, implying that this practice is a decadent modern development (see below).

[17] Although Barner (1971) 292 collects some of the Greek tragic terms designating song, much work remains to be done on the numerous different words used in tragedy to describe vocal performance, and on how they might illuminate actors' techniques of singing and speaking.

[18] See Hall (1999a) 108–20 and Csapo, this volume.

[19] Hall (1997a) 100, 111; Hall (1999a) 120–2.

singing in tragedy that the nightingale, formerly Procne, the infanticidal mother, became most closely connected.

The story of Procne's murder of her son Itys was staged in Sophocles' famous *Tereus* (the music of which seems to have been memorable, see below) and by the Roman tragedians Livius Andronicus and Accius. Elsewhere tragedy alludes to this myth when describing women's singing. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, for example, Cassandra's dochmiac singing is likened by the chorus (also using dochmiacs) to the song of the nightingale (1140–9):

> CHORUS You are crazed, possessed by a god, and singing a tuneless tune about your own fate, like some shrill nightingale, insatiable in lament – alas! – who in the misery of her heart mourns 'Itys, Itys', whose death was full of evil for both his parents.
>
> CASSANDRA Ah, ah, for the life of the clear-voiced nightingale! The gods clothed her in winged form, and gave her a sweet life with nothing to cry about, whereas for me there awaits the blow of a two-edged weapon.

The comparison was presumably reinforced by the lost melody, and certainly by the 'twittering' effect produced by the high proportion of short syllables in the resolved dochmiacs of this particular interchange; the chorus' description of Cassandra's melody as a 'tuneless tune' (*nomon anomon*) itself scans as five short syllables consecutively. Cassandra, however, shifts the focus from the bird's voice to her winged body, reminding us that the singing actor playing her is engaged in an emphatically physical activity.[20]

The actor playing Cassandra needed skill in antiphonal singing, which requires a solo voice with a timbre distinct from that of the choral group but minutely adjusted to its tonality and pace of delivery. Cassandra's sung dialogue with the chorus consists of serial pairs of metrical units of similar length, which respond strophically. The structured rhythmical character of Aeschylus' music is suggested by Dionysus' description in *Frogs* of his melodies as appropriate for 'someone drawing water from a well' (1297). But tragic music evolved alongside that of citharody and dithyrambic choruses, which had already been composed without strophic responsion by the middle of the fifth century (Arist. *Rhet.* 3.1409b).

In Euripides' dateable plays actors' songs increasingly replace strophic responsion with asymmetric, 'freeform' metrical structures,

[20] Segal (1995) 68. See Valakas, this volume. See also Aeschylus' Danaids, who compare their own singing with the voice of the nightingale, the wife of Tereus (*Supp.* 58–67), and the comments below on Sophocles' *Electra*.

characterised by repetition of individual words.[21] Euripides' astrophic monodists are mostly self-absorbed women, who use song to express intimate and passionate emotions.[22] Astrophic song is much harder to learn than song in a repeated metre, which is one reason why it was associated with the solo voice rather than with choruses ([Arist.] *Probl.* 19.15). But it also increased the ornamentation and mimetic element (see Csapo, this volume) and affected the vocal timbre. Timotheus, the citharode most closely associated with the 'New Music' influencing Euripides, differentiated his own relaxed, beguiling sound from that of older, out-of-date singers, 'the maulers' of songs 'who strain and yell with the far-ringing voices of heralds' (κηρύκων λιγυμακροφώνων τείνοντας ἰυγάς, *Persians PMG* 791, 218–20).

A plausible tradition held that the earliest tragedians were star actors and took the principal roles in their own plays. Sophocles is said to have played the lead in his own *Thamyras*, in which this mythical bard performed hexameters and played the cithara (*Life* 5; fr. 242 *TrGF*, see also Wilson, this volume). Sophocles' *Thamyras* is probably illustrated on a hydria from the middle of the century (fig. 1). It has the words 'Euaion is beautiful' inscribed over the figure of an agitated woman, probably Thamyras' mother Argiope, dancing under the influence of his music. Since we know that Aeschylus' son Euaion was a tragic actor, we may be looking at a picture of characters played in the original production by a singing, strumming Sophocles and by Aeschylus' dancing son.[23]

Sophocles is supposed to have given up performing in his own plays because of his weak voice (*Life* 4), a tradition which functioned as an aetiological narrative for the emergence of the specialist tragic singer. Sophocles is also said to have taken the talents of his actors into account when composing their roles (*Life* 6), and the vocal skills of the available lead actors (for example, the Tlepolemos who often acted for Sophocles (schol. on Ar. *Clouds* 1266)) must have influenced all the tragedians;[24] any competent singer, for example, knew the exact range of his own voice and

[21] E.g. *IA* 1289–90, 'Ιδαῖος / 'Ιδαῖος ἐλέγετ' ἐλέγετ', on which England (1891) 130 comments: 'probably it was the music which was mainly responsible for this double repetition'. On this kind of diction and repetition in Euripidean monodies see Barlow (1986b). But Euripides was not the only tragedian to experiment with the new, freer form of actor's song. Io in the Aeschylean *PV* (566–73) is an interesting early example of an astrophic monodist.

[22] Damen (1990) 134–5. In Electra's monody at *Orestes* 960–1012, for example, Euripides moves his actor from strophic to astrophic form at the point where Electra's grief moves beyond control to hysteria (982, see Collard (1975) vol. II, 359).

[23] Rome, Vatican 16549 (*IGD* 69, no. III. 2.9). On the vase and on Euaion see further Green, this volume and Kaimio (1993) 22.

[24] Owen (1936) 150, 153.

Fig. 1 Thamyras and his mother Argiope: played by Sophocles(?) and Aeschylus' son Euaion (Photo: J. R. Green)

needed to have his singing pitched accordingly.[25] Actors who performed alongside star protagonists also had to be able to sing. In Euripides' *Orestes* the deuteragonist who originally played Electra and Helen's Phrygian servant, in support of the protagonist Hegelochos' Orestes, must have possessed a remarkable singing voice with a high tessitura.[26] Aeschines had to sing an antiphonal lament as Sophocles' Creon in *Antigone* (probably a tritagonist's role, see Easterling, this volume), but also a striking monody as the blinded Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba* (Dem. 18.267, see fig. 2).[27]

[25] Callicratidas in Thesleff (1961) 106.21.

[26] See further Falkner, this volume. Information from several sources tells us more than usual about the music to Euripides' *Orestes*, an exceptionally popular play on the ancient stage. An important papyrus of the third or second century BC (Vienna G 2315, see Pöhlmann (1970) 78–82) preserves the sung melody and accompaniment to seven lines delivered by the chorus (338–44), and there is no reason to suppose that this music was not composed by Euripides himself. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing in the Augustan era about the relationship of words to music, seems to have been able to make a detailed consultation of a 'score' of Euripides' *Orestes* (*On Composition of Words* 5.11.63, see Pöhlmann (1960) 19–24). And a scholiast happens to have recorded the information that the actor playing Electra sang at a very high pitch (*oxeiai phōnēi*), appropriate to a dirge, when asking the entering chorus to be quiet (schol. on *Or.* 176). See also Damen (1990) 141–2.

[27] Stephanis (1988) no. 90.3a.

Fig. 2 The blinded Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba* (©The British Museum)