

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lysurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THROUGH THE LYCURGAN LOOKING GLASS

The Peloponnesian War concluded in the spring of 404 BC when an Athens overcome by siege and hunger at last surrendered to Sparta. Not long afterwards, the Spartan general Lysander undertook to replace the Athenian democracy with the oligarchic regime that would come to be known as the Thirty Tyrants. The Athenians initially resisted this devastating reversal of their constitution, but Lysander responded with the grave warning that the city had already been caught in violation of the terms of peace by failing to tear down its walls. He promised to take the case to the Peloponnesian League and, according to Plutarch, the ensuing assembly of those allies saw proposals to sell the Athenians into slavery, raze the city to the ground and give over the Attic countryside to the grazing of sheep.¹ Xenophon, in his narrative of the end of the war, reports that no Athenians had slept the night after the news of the previous summer's defeat at Aegospotami: instead they passed its dark hours mourning the dead, but also lamenting 'much more for themselves, thinking that they would suffer the same things as they had wrought upon the Melians, colonists of the Lacedaemonians, when they conquered them by siege, and upon the Histiaeans and the Scionaeans and the Tornaeans and Aeginetans and so many other Greeks'.² When the war did conclude the next spring it seemed that this was precisely the fate that Lysander and the rest of his League had planned. What could have changed their minds?

According to Plutarch's account, the allies had their second thoughts at the banquet after the assembly. There a

¹ Plut. *Lys.* 15.2; compare the account at Xen. *Hell.* 2.19–20. On how the proposed destruction of the city in 404 was remembered in fourth-century Athens see Steinbock (2013) 280–341.

² Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.3.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

certain Phocian man entertained the gathered leaders by singing the choral *parodos* of Euripides' *Electra*.³ At the performance 'all were bent to pity, and it came to seem a merciless deed to destroy and make an end of a city so illustrious and which had produced such men'; that is, such men as the poet Euripides.⁴ Elsewhere, in his *Life of Nicias*, Plutarch also writes of how after the previous decade's disaster of the Sicilian Expedition some of the Athenians enslaved in Sicily had been 'saved by Euripides' because they were able to teach Sicilians portions of his plays.⁵ Now with the entire Peloponnesian War at a final and bitter end, all of Athens apparently owed its salvation to one tragic poet.

We should certainly suspect the historicity of Plutarch's anecdote. Yet the notion that Athenian tragedians had the power to save their city and its citizens was potent enough to be repeated many times in the ancient tradition about classical drama.⁶ In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which premiered at the Lenaea of 405, just over a year before the war ended, the character of Dionysus posed the question to 'Aeschylus' and to 'Euripides' of how Athens might assure its own salvation (σωτηρία).⁷ At the end of the play Dionysus, hoping that the vehicle of that salvation would be one of the city's great (dead) playwrights, chooses to resurrect Aeschylus: 'I came down here for a poet,' Dionysus explains to Pluto in the final scene of the play, 'so that the rescued (σωθείσα) city might lead its choruses'.⁸ When the curtain falls, Dionysus is poised to return to Athens with Aeschylus in tow, optimistic that the great tragedian of the past will secure the city's future. Plutarch, writing nearly half a millennium later, also saw a tragic poet as the

³ Plutarch quotes Eur. *El.* 167–8, the first two lines of the play's *parodos*. See Steinbock (2013) 319–23 on the (more likely) reasons that Athens was spared and 331–6 and on the role that the Phocians did actually play in reversing the city's fate.

⁴ Plut. *Lys.* 15.3. ⁵ Plut. *Nic.* 29.2–4.

⁶ On this conceit see also pages 188–90. Another late anecdote, recorded by Pausanias (born about a half century after Plutarch), links an act of mercy on the part of Lysander with the power of the Athenian tragedians: when the Lacedaemonians invaded Attica, their general (i.e. Lysander) had a dream that he saw Dionysus bidding him to pay the 'new siren' the honours that are due to the dead. The general interpreted the 'new siren' to mean the recently deceased Sophocles: Paus. 1.21.1–2.

⁷ Ar. *Ran.* 1435–6. ⁸ Ar. *Ran.* 1419–20.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Through the Lycurgan looking glass

man to whom the city of Athens owed its collective life: Aristophanes' Dionysus had erred only in his choice of tragedian for the job.

None of the three great classical tragedians whose works have survived to this day – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – lived to see their city's defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, let alone to hear the story that a play by one of their number preserved Athens from obliteration. Euripides died sometime in the year 406 BC and Sophocles followed shortly after in 405. For the Dionysus of the *Frogs*, the death of Sophocles was itself a nail in the coffin of Athens' great tragic tradition: at the outset of the play the god announces to Hercules that he is about to journey to Hades in search of a 'clever' or 'good' (δεξιός) poet, 'because [such poets] no longer exist and the ones who are left are bad'.⁹ The *Frogs* marks an early dramatisation of a deep nostalgia for the three great tragedians, but one which continued to regard the deceased poets as at odds and in competition with each other, even within the Underworld.

In the latter decades of the fourth century, however, only a few short generations after the *Frogs*, the contribution of the fifth-century tragedians would come to be viewed as a unified one, embodied atop a single statue base. Their singular achievement would be cast as a crowning glory of Athens, one of the greatest gifts that the city had bestowed upon Hellas as a whole. The new vision of 'classical' tragedy that developed during the second half of the fourth century is nearly impossible to disentangle from what we now perceive as the fifth-century dramatic triumph. In the light of the last few decades of scholarship, one could hardly dispute that for many years after the passing of Attic tragedy's 'historical moment' (to borrow Vernant's famous formulation), the city's tragic theatre industry remained very much alive and well.¹⁰ It is, of course, only

⁹ Ar. *Ran.* 72: οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὐκέτ' εἰσὶν, οἱ δ' ὄντες κακοί.

¹⁰ Vernant (1972) 13–17, on 'Le moment historique de la tragédie en Grèce'. For defences of the continued liveliness of the tragic theatre in the fourth century see esp. Easterling (1993) and Le Guen (1995), who both write against what Easterling

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

with a retrospective gaze that we follow Aristophanes in seeing a rupture in the tragic tradition after the death of Sophocles, a rupture that seems even more violent because of its close coincidence with the end of the Peloponnesian War. Yet already in late classical Athens, a deep and gaping fissure – however imaginary – divided the theatrical landscape between an era that died with Euripides and Sophocles and one which was born with all subsequent production.

The first signs of these contours are evident in the *Frogs*, in which Aeschylus, Euripides and to a lesser extent Sophocles (whose death shortly before the play's premiere may have limited his comedic 'participation'), are positioned as the only serious contenders for the Underworld's Chair in Tragedy. Outside of Old Comedy, however, Greek literature of the fifth century is surprisingly silent on the subjects of tragedy and tragedians. One searches with little success in the works of Herodotus and Thucydides for mentions of tragic drama or playwrights. Herodotus' most extensive discussion comes in the form of his story about the playwright Phrynichus, who was fined thousands of drachmas for reminding the Athenians of a painful event in Ionian history with his play *The Sack of Miletus*.¹¹ Thucydides, on the other hand, never directly discusses tragic drama.¹² And excepting those mentions of tragic *choregiai* undertaken as liturgies by wealthy Athenians, the tragic theatre rarely appears in the oratory of the fifth and early fourth centuries; the most notable exception is Isocrates' criticism of the old practice of parading the surplus allied tribute – along with the year's war orphans – before the allies

(1993) 59 calls the 'stereotype of sudden and total collapse' of drama after the fifth century.

¹¹ Her. 6.121, the only passage of his which contains forms of the word δρᾶμα. At 5.67 he mentions that the Sicyonians honoured Adrastus with 'tragic choruses'. He also tells of Aeschylus' innovation in making Artemis the daughter of Demeter in one of his plays (2.156.6), yet given the theme of the *Histories* it is noteworthy, as Ford (2009) 817 remarks, that Herodotus makes no mention of Aeschylus' *Persians*.

¹² He does identify the Peace of Nicias that ended the Archidamian War in 421 as having been sworn 'just after the Great Dionysia': Thuc. 5.20.1. The terms of the peace were to be renewed annually by the Athenians at the celebration of the Hyacinthia in Sparta and by the Lacedaemonians in Athens at the Great Dionysia (5.20.3).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Through the Lycurgan looking glass

gathered at the Great Dionysia.¹³ Plato, evoking the life of the late fifth-century city, does have his Socrates refer on a number of occasions to the great tragedians, and the *Symposium* paints a particularly vivid picture of everyday ‘dramatic’ life in its setting at the celebration of Agathon’s first tragic victory. But rich though the Platonic dialogues may be in abstract discussions of tragedy and in theatrical *obiter dicta*, they offer reconstructed pictures of the city’s fifth-century cultural life rather than direct reflections upon the space that tragedy occupied in Plato’s own Athens. Not until the second half of the fourth century, in the wake of another Athenian military and political disaster, do we find another torrent of discourse centred upon the ‘politics’ of tragic drama. At the heart of this new discourse, robust in prose and poetry alike, are questions about the relationships between imperial Athens and tragedy’s perceived fifth-century zenith, as well as between the present-day city and its theatrical heritage.

The relative explosion of ‘tragic’ material occurs in the third quarter of the fourth century, the period that this book will examine in detail. Now, once again, it would seem that the city was calling upon its tragedians to come to its aid in a time of crisis. The Macedonian victory over the Greeks at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 heralded more loudly than ever Macedon’s imperial ambitions in Greece. With the future of Athenian independence in question, the city was forced to re-evaluate which institutions, legacies and virtues defined its uniqueness both in the Greek world and beyond. At this point in the city’s history, an impulse to what Hans-Joachim Gehrke has called ‘intentional history’ (*intentionale Geschichte*) was accordingly strong: the Athenians sought to mould the shape of the past in an attempt to define their identity and direct the course of their future.¹⁴ It is no coincidence, then, that the decades of the Macedonian ascendancy mark one of the liveliest and most

¹³ Isoc. 8.82 (*de Pace*). He also occasionally refers briefly to tragic drama, but does not reflect upon it as an Athenian institution (for a brief exception see Isoc. 12.168). On Isocrates’ references to poetry see Papillon (1998) 43–8.

¹⁴ Gehrke (2001) and (2010); perhaps the clearest definition of the term is offered by Luraghi and Foxhall (2010): intentional history ‘is the projection in time of the elements of subjective, self-conscious self-categorization which construct the identity of a group as a group’; they emphasise that ‘A key issue is that of social agency in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

important chapters in the history of Athenian drama and in the evolution of what, in time, would become the tragic corpus that we possess today. On the one hand, this was the period in which the entire body of classical tragedy began to boil down to a common performance repertory and a selection of plays that would serve as standard texts among the educated elite for centuries to come. Even more significantly, however, it was also the era in which the seeds were first planted of the notion that Greek tragedy had been a uniquely and quintessentially Athenian triumph. Attic tragedy has long been regarded as a fundamental aspect of the broader phenomenon of the 'Athenian miracle', but if we wish to confront that 'miracle' honestly we must also acknowledge that it was the Athenians themselves who, especially in the latter part of the fourth century, began constructing the pedestal upon which their drama still stands in the modern imagination.¹⁵

This book will present a detailed case as to how, in the third quarter of the fourth century BC, a number of measures were taken in Athens to affirm to the Greek world that the cultural achievement of tragedy was owed to the special qualities of the city that had first fostered it. By means of rhetoric, architecture, inscriptions, statues, archives and even legislation, these years saw the 'classical' tragedians and their plays packaged and advertised as the products and vital embodiments of the city's idealised past. The evidence of these efforts comes to us primarily from the years between the Peace of Philocrates, ratified by Athens and Philip II of Macedon just days after the Great Dionysia was celebrated in 346, and the Lamian War, which ended with Athenian defeat in 322. At the conclusion of that war, fought in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's death, Athens ceded its independence to Macedon and saw Antipater installed as the city's regent. These years largely coincide with the lifetime of Alexander, who was born in Pella in

the formulation of ideas, notions and stories about the past, and how these become, or aspire to become, possessions of a whole community' (9).

¹⁵ Mitchel (1970) poses this rhetorical question with respect to the Lycurgan Era more generally: 'For Athens [Lykourgos] was the founder of the classical tradition, and if the tradition had not begun to crystallize under Lykourgos in the 330s and 320s, one may well ask when and under whom it would have had its start?' (52).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Through the Lycurgan looking glass

356, succeeded his father Philip II of Macedon to the throne in 335 and died in Babylon in 323. The second half of the period, my primary object of study, closely corresponds to what is now commonly known as the ‘Lycurgan Era’; that is, the era traditionally bounded by the Athenian defeats at Chaeronea in 338 and in the Lamian War, and dominated by the political career of Lycurgus son of Lycophon, of the deme of Butadae. The principal administrator of the city’s public treasury during that era, Lycurgus is regarded today as these years’ pre-eminent Athenian statesman.¹⁶

Lycurgus stood at the forefront of many of his city’s efforts to shape its memory of classical tragedy and to capitalise upon the economic and diplomatic potential of the still-vibrant Athenian theatre industry. As Graham Oliver has recently reminded us, however, we should be wary of seeing a total break between the middle decades of the century and the beginning of Lycurgus’ tenure at the head of state finances in 338.¹⁷ Lycurgus’ (and Lycurgan-Era) policies show strands of continuity from previous decades, particularly from the 350s and 340s, when as head of the city’s theoric fund Eubulus occupied a position in the city comparable to the one that Lycurgus later held.¹⁸ Already during Eubulus’ administration we find evidence of Athens’ growing interest in the strength and promotion of its theatre industry. Recently scholars have also begun to question whether Lycurgus has lent his name deservingly to the years of his own administration.¹⁹ Nevertheless, here I shall be referring to the era as ‘Lycurgan’ both for the sake of convenience

¹⁶ Lycurgus’ tenure extended from 336/5–325/4. For a recent review of the chronology of Lycurgus’ political career and the problem of which office he held (ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς διοικήσεως) between 336/5 and 325/4 (in a succession of four-year terms, the last cut short by his death) see Friend (2009) 61–3. For the dates of the public offices held by Lycurgus see Develin (1989); for overviews of his political career see esp. Humphreys (1985) and Mitchel (1970) ch. 2 ‘The Program’.

¹⁷ Oliver (2011).

¹⁸ For an overview of Eubulus’ administration see Cawkwell (1963).

¹⁹ See in particular Brun (2005) and Rhodes (2010), who both qualify the period’s traditional identification as ‘Lycurgan’. Rhodes nevertheless points out that it is ‘reasonable to think of the Lycurgan period as of the Periclean period, as long as we are clear about what we are claiming and what we are not’: Lycurgus was certainly ‘one of the most prominent men in Athens’, though he was by no means singlehandedly responsible for his city’s policies or finances (88).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

and because there is good evidence that a number of the initiatives that I discuss either were associated with him or seem to cohere with his broader vision for the city. Oftentimes and as has become convention, my references to ‘Lycurgan’ initiatives serve as a shorthand for policies enacted not just by Lycurgus, but by his circle of like-minded citizens.

The process of tragedy’s classicisation in the Lycurgan Era would prove to be of substantial consequence for the shape of the tragic corpus that managed to outlast antiquity. It is generally accepted, for example, that Lycurgus’ reaffirmation of Athens’ own tragic *tre corone*, a kind of canon already dramatised by the *Frogs* of 405, helped to pave the way for the survival of works by the same three tragedians – and those tragedians alone – to the present day. What has received less than due attention, however, is the striking overlap between the tragedies for which there is an indirect fourth-century tradition and those plays which have been preserved:²⁰ testimonia for Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, Sophocles’ *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Philoctetes* and Euripides’ *Hecuba*, *Hippolytus*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Medea*, *Orestes* and *Trojan Women* all appear among our fourth-century prose sources and comic fragments. It is also an oft-invoked (though still sobering) statistic that, of the 300 or so plays supposedly written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, only thirty-three, or about one tenth, survive.²¹ In the light of those numbers, we should regard it as exceptionally noteworthy that roughly half of the tragedies that Aristotle mentions by name in the *Poetics* can be found on that list of thirty-three.²² While the *Poetics* itself was surely influential in shaping the body of tragic texts that we have

²⁰ See however Easterling (1997b) 212–20 and (1993) 564 for the earliest processes of ‘canon’ formation (and the importance of reperformance to those processes) in the fourth century.

²¹ The *Suda* (s.v. each of the tragedians’ names) reports that Aeschylus wrote 90 plays, Sophocles 90 or ‘as some say many more’ (ὡς δέ τινες καὶ πολλῶ πλείω) and Euripides either 75 or 92.

²² Surviving plays identifiably mentioned in the *Poetics*: Aesch. *Cho.*; Soph. *Ant.*, *El.*, *OT*; Eur. *IA*, *IT*, *Or.*, *Med.*; Aristotle is also likely referring to *Prometheus Bound* at 1456a2–3. Lost plays mentioned include Aesch. *Niobe*, *Philoctetes*, *Daughters of Phorcys*; Soph. *Tereus*, *Tyro* and *Wounded Odysseus*; Eur. *Cresphontes*, *Melanippe the Wise* and *Philoctetes*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lyscurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Through the Lyscurgan looking glass

today, the other witnesses to many of the plays which Aristotle mentions suggest that, by the 330s, the wheels of canonisation were already in motion for the tragic poets and their individual corpora. Though typically overlooked by historians of the theatre, the mass of other surviving texts and documents from this part of the fourth century constitutes significant evidence for that process, a process whose end results would shape a great portion of Western literary and dramatic history.

Together the sources also attest to contemporary Athenian attempts to reconceptualise the very idea of tragic drama by presenting it as an historical institution that was exclusively the product and possession of the Athenian demos. Scholars have long been interested in the relationship between tragedy and the fifth-century Athenian Empire as well as in identifying expressions and critiques of Athenian imperialism latent within the tragic texts.²³ Debates continue today about the extent to which the tragic plays engaged with a uniquely Athenian civic ideology when they first premiered, and these debates are far from being resolved. But despite the many open and lingering questions about the relationship between tragedy, democracy and the fifth-century empire, texts from the latter half of the fourth century – an era in which the Athenian polis no longer reigned politically supreme – attest to highly conscious attempts in Athens to forge ideological links between the city's character and its theatrical history.

During this period, in 339 BC, 'old' (*palaion*) comedy also joined the programme of the Great Dionysia, alongside the productions of 'old tragedy' that had been in place since 386.²⁴ This addition speaks further to Athens' heightened attention to its theatrical past during this period, and a study of Athens' delicate relationship with its comic past (and the era of liberal free speech that it represented) is also to be desired. Yet

²³ This topic is vast, but for tragedy as an expression of Athenian imperialism see esp. Kowalzig (2006) on tragedy's appropriation of the Athenian allies' mythical histories, and Kurke (1997) on its absorption of 'foreign' lyric forms. Seodell (2001) offers an important account of the attention that Athens paid to its theatrical industry while the city grew as an imperial power. The bibliography of Carter (2011) marks a useful compilation of modern scholarship on the politics of fifth-century tragedies.

²⁴ *IG* ii² 2318.1565–6 Millis and Olson.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06202-3 - Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy

Johanna Hanink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the generation of comic playwriting that would come to be regarded as Greece's Golden Age of Comedy – that is, New Comedy – was still on the horizon in the third quarter of the fourth century. Tragedy already occupied a central place in the city's *imaginaire* largely thanks to its early success outside of Athens, as well as to the attention that it had received from 'Old' comic playwrights such as Aristophanes. A spectacular era of tragic production had coincided with the political *floruit* of Athens, and this chronology was not lost on later generations of Athenians.²⁵ In particular, the evidence for the cultural programme advanced in the 330s points to a developing civic narrative designed to connect the city's illustrious history with its signature art form. This narrative actively bound the achievements of fifth-century drama and the figures of the great tragedians to idealised visions of both the Athenian past and the city's 'national' character.

The third quarter of the fourth century, and more specifically the Lycurgan Era, may mark relatively untravelled territory for many students of fifth-century tragedy. Yet as readers confronting the tragic plays that survive, we should bear in mind that these decades created a filter which cannot be removed from any critical lens that we apply to the fifth-century material today. Both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the present-day tragic corpus show the clearest signs of first having come into focus during these years, when the first recorded attempt to stabilise, protect and preserve the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides was supposedly made by Lycurgus himself. Only a decade or so earlier (between 347/6 and 343/2), during Eubulus' tenure as overseer of the theoric fund, the records of victors at the Great Dionysia upon which we rely

²⁵ Aeschylus' first victory came in 484 (so the *Parian Chronicle*), just six years before the formation of the Delian League in 478 (cf. Thuc. 1.96); his *Oresteia* was produced in 458, four years before the treasury of the Delian League is usually thought to have been moved to Athens (i.e. in 454/3, though the treasury may have been moved earlier). Athens was defeated by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War in 404, about two years after the death of Euripides and one year after that of Sophocles. Pausanias synchronises Sophocles' death with Athens' surrender to Sparta in 404: Paus. 1.21.1–2 (n. 6 above).