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Ancient Greek Tragedy as Performance: the Literature–Performance Problematic

In this article Mario Frendo engages with the idea of ancient Greek tragedy as a performance phenomenon, questioning critiques that approach it exclusively via literary–dramatic methodologies. Based on the premise that ancient Greek tragedy developed within the predominantly oral context of fifth-century BCE Greece, he draws on Hans-Thies Lehmann's study of tragedy and its relation to dramatic theatre, where it is argued that the genre is essentially 'predramatic'. Considered as such, ancient Greek tragedy cannot be fully investigated using dramatic theories developed since early modernity. In view of this, Walter J. Ong's caution with respect to the rational processes produced by generations of literate culture will be acknowledged and alternative critiques sought, including performance criticism and performance-oriented frameworks such as orality, via which Frendo traces possible critical trajectories that would allow contemporary scholarship to deal with ancient tragedy as a performance rather than literary phenomenon. Reference will be made to Aristotle's use of the term 'poetry', and how performance criticism may provide new insight into how the *Poetics* deals with one of the earliest performance phenomena in the West. Mario Frendo is lecturer of theatre and performance and Head of the Department of Theatre Studies at the School of Performing Arts, University of Malta, where he is director of CaP, a research group focusing on links between culture and performance. His research interests include musicality in theatre, ancient tragedy, and relations between philosophical thought and performance.

Key terms: performance criticism, orality, literary criticism, dramaturgy, Aristotle, *Poetics.*

IN THE INTRODUCTION to his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, published in 1965 with the title *Classical Literary Criticism: Aristotle, Horace, Longinus,* T. S. Dorsch discusses the work of the ancient Greek comic playwright Aristophanes. For Dorsch, Aristophanes is 'a very important figure in the early history of *literary criticism*'.[1] Aristophanes' critical prowess in terms of what Dorsch considers as the playwright's 'well-developed taste and a keen insight in his *literary* judgements',[2] is praised, and he emphasizes how Aristophanes 'does not attempt anything like a full estimate of the *authors* whom he treats, not even Euripides, but his views are always grounded in good sense, and are presented more concretely, perhaps, than those of any other critic until comparatively recent times'.[3]

According to Dorsch, Aristophanes is 'consistent in his dislike of excesses and affectations of any kind, and he brings out a fundamental aspect of *literary criticism* in the importance that he attaches to moral values in the *judgement of literature*'.[4] All this is supported by the claim that with Aristophanes we enter a new era of literary criticism, as 'in most of his eleven extant plays, which were produced in the last quarter of the fifth and the early fourth centuries BC, the *writers* and thinkers of his own age and of the immediately preceding age figure, often very prominently, among the objects of satire'.[5]

The language used by Dorsch in his introduction is synonymous with a critical perspective underpinned by a literary agenda which, as announced prominently in the book's subtitle, manifestly bypasses the performative aspects of the texts it addresses and considers them exclusively as a literary genre. The words I have italicized in the foregoing excerpts indicate this: 'literary', 'authors', 'writers', and 'literary criticism' are terms used in literary-oriented critiques that we are accustomed to.

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In the same introduction, Dorsch also makes reference to Aristophanes' *The Frogs* where an agon takes place in the second part of the comedy beween Aeschylus and Euripides with Dionysus as judge. As Dorsch claims, 'Aeschylus emerges as the "weightier" poet' and is 'adjudged the clear winner'.[6] Aristophanes' consideration of Aeschylus as the weightier poet is not to be underestimated. Aeschylus was the earliest of the three tragedians of whom we are in possession of surviving texts. He was therefore the closest to proto-dramatic activity and, as I aim to demonstrate below, more 'primitive' than Euripides in terms of literary dramatic procedures. Yet, according to Aristophanes, he was a weightier poet when compared to Euripides.

In terms of chronological proximity, Aristophanes is perhaps the closest observer of the aesthetic and cultural context within which ancient tragedy was developed and performed. He is definitely much closer than Aristotle whose *Poetics* is considered as a key text for the understanding of ancient tragedy. In fact, Dorsch rightly points out that Aristophanes is one of the first critics of ancient tragedy, a claim shared by contemporary scholars who, like Matthew Wright, consider fifth-century comedy as 'among the most important categories of evidence for the historian of criticism'.[7]

However, Aristophanes' understanding of tragedy, unlike Dorsch's, is informed by its aesthetics beyond literature, where sensitivity to his contemporary cultural context is evident and most tangible. In this way Aristophanes' perspectives on tragedy carry considerable weight, especially the fact that, as Rosalind Thomas points out, 'the image of the poet in the throes of composition given in Aristophanes does not include pen and paper'.[8] Aristophanes is rather direct in this respect, when, at one point in *The Frogs*, he makes Aeschylus utter the following sentiments directed towards Euripides:

> No more of 'line for line'; let him . . . get in,
> With all his books collected in his arms,
> Two lines of mine shall overweigh the lot.
> (lines 1407–10)[9]

It is, therefore, rather curious that Dorsch uses Aristophanes to introduce his literary-oriented translation of the *Poetics*. Aristophanes, as Carl Anderson and Keith T. Dix argue, 'was keenly aware of the complicated relationship between oral performance of drama and the written text'.[10] According to them, in fact, the question is not how Aristophanes is so consistent in his 'judgement of literature', as Dorsch claims, but how he 'uses literacy, or the lack thereof, to comic effect, and how his plays depict not the triumph of literacy at Athens, but rather suspicion of and resistance to it'.[11] Anderson and Dix's arguments are a manifestation of the literarature–performance problematic that often surrounds critiques of ancient tragedy.

Alternative Critical Perspectives

My aim here is to reflect on critical perspectives that avoid literary exclusivity when dealing with Ancient Greek tragedy. In the course of my discussion I will combine alternative critical platforms with performance criticism so as to trace possible analytic strategies with which to deal with the accumulating residue of gaps left by centuries of literary critiques when investigating the tragic phenomenon.

The arguments brought forward acknowledge, in the first instance, the complex nature of ancient Greek tragedy – an interdisciplinary performance phenomenon that developed within the predominantly oral context of fifth-century BCE Greece. In the second instance, they are informed by the premise that any critical account addressing ancient Greek tragedy must start from the fact that *if* a literary or dramatic text existed prior to performance, this would have been but one of the elements of its composition. In view of this, I will problematize some of the key notions related to the tragic phenomenon that are often approached via literary critiques, including: playwrights and their role in tragic composition; the concept of drama and its relation to dramaturgical processes; and poetry, specifically Aristotle's use of the term in his *Poetics*. This will allow me to shed light on the problematic relationship

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between literature and performance when dealing with ancient tragedy and how this impacts on our understanding of both the few scripts of tragedies that reached us from fifth-century Greece as well as critical texts which, like Aristotle's *Poetics*, deal with the tragic phenomenon.

One of the first to question literary exclusiveness when dealing with ancient Greek tragedy was Friedrich Nietzsche. In his *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, published in 1872, Nietzsche develops what I consider as amongst the strongest claims of interdisciplinarity in ancient tragedy.[12] This makes Nietzsche's theoretical treatise one of the most effective critical articulations when dealing with ancient tragedy as a performance phenomenon. Following Nietzsche, ancient Greek tragedy can be defined as a performative poetic expression developed through an interdisciplinarity manifested in music, dance, and song. In view of this, tragic performance practices in Ancient Greece may concretely be reconsidered in terms of a liminality that oscillates between vocal utterances and embodied practices, without assuming any preferred allegiance to discursive practices.[13]

Although seldom considered beyond the philological realm, *The Birth of Tragedy* is the context within which Nietzsche locates ancient tragedy outside the limitations of literature. As I argue elsewhere,

> Nietzsche does this by unearthing the complexities of the tragic when, rather than limiting himself to acknowledged literary critiques for his analysis, he reconsiders tragedy as a performance event.[14]

His strong opposition to interpretations given by his contemporaries is clear in the following passage:

> We have to admit that the meaning of the tragic myth . . . never became transparent and conceptually clear to the Greek poets, far less to the Greek philosophers; to a certain extent, their heroes speak more superficially than they act; myth is certainly not objectified adequately in the spoken word. The structure of the scenes and the vivid images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself can put into words and concepts.[15]

Here Nietzsche clearly questions the supremacy attributed by his peers to discursive strategies and argues that it is the heroes' performance that adequately articulates the myth around which the tragic act is generated. The 'structure of the scenes and vivid images' – i.e. the performance of tragedy – for him augments the poet's wisdom and ventures far beyond the relevance of words and concepts.

Critiques that ignore the performative nature of ancient tragedy which, as I will outline below, persisted after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, often lead to critical confusion. Like Averroës in Jorge Louis Borges' 1947 short story 'Averroës' Search', they continue 'trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theatre is'.[16] The problem for Borges' character is precisely his confusion between literature and performance when studying Aristotle's *Poetics*. In other words, Averroës confuses the written drama with the performed theatre event.

The Literature–Performance Problematic

Borges, like Nietzsche before him, was aware of the literature–performance problematic. In his writing he was ironically giving signals from within the literary domain as to the serious implications of confusing literature with performance – a confusion that he poetically describes as 'the god who set himself the task of creating a bull but turned out a buffalo'.[17] Such confusion impacts directly on the ontology of performed events and is the consequence of a critical haziness surrounding texts dealing with theatre and performance.

While, of course, it is worth acknowledging the relevance of commentaries that refer to playwrights and their works as fine examples of literature, this should be done with caution so as not to deflect us from the even more important fact that what we are dealing with are phenomena of a performative nature. This is even more pertinent when engaging with contexts such as fifth-century Greece, where the notion of poetry is itself as complex as that of tragedy, and

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where the idea of 'authorship'– in terms of the authority the term implies – did not exist.

Recent critical perspectives provide us with enough awareness not to think of Aristophanes as a literary critic or Euripides as just an author. Directly relevant is Michel Foucault's remark when he critiques the notion of the author:

> In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act – an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically, it was a gesture fraught with risks before becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership.[18]

In view of Foucault's articulation, which in terms of the weight he gives to discourse as act resonates with Nietzsche's perspective, it is worth emphasizing the fact that in the English term 'playwright', any associations with writing are purely phonetic and should remain as such. Ancient poets were play 'wrights' – 'makers' of performance responsible not only of written scripts, but more importantly of acts – i.e. of *what* and *how* was to be performed.

Although a writing culture was evident during the time when Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were composing their tragedies, the extent to which the assumption that these poets were operating exclusively as writers is far from indisputable. As Thomas argues, it is important to keep in mind that 'ancient Greece was in many ways an oral society in which the written word took second place to the spoken.

Far more was heard or spoken, rather than written and read, than we can easily envisage.'[19] Claims like Thomas's support not only the arguments of Nietzsche, Borges, and Foucault, but also a caution many seem to exhibit in dealing with performance-related phenomena.

One of the reasons for such caution is that contemporary scholarship is becoming more culture-sensitive, acknowledging in the process the pressing need to do away with what David Wiles calls 'the old separation between form and context'.[20] Wiles continues:

> It is no longer good enough to think we can first study the *context* – i.e. the Greek world-view, the conventions of performance, the historical facts – and then move on to *the plays themselves*, to see what the plays are *saying*. The form of Greek plays is inseparable from what they meant and mean.[21]

Recognizing a Wider Context

This may explain why, especially during the first decades of the twenty-first century, we have seen a surge in attention to ancient poetry from fields of study beyond the literary. It also explains why contemporary fifth-century observers of ancient tragedy like Aristophanes are given attention beyond the literary value of their texts. As Thomas claims, 'the close and comforting identity of literacy with civilization that is so strong in twentieth-century culture begins to seem peripheral and at worst irrelevant to the understanding of a society like that of classical Greece'.[22] Such a claim gains more currency when we remember that in fifth-century Greece, 'artistic achievements were largely transmitted orally, entirely without writing, or where poetry was performed and sung rather than read silently in written texts'.[23]

To this effect, we need to acknowledge the different layers that constitute performance and apply proper critical frameworks that will allow us to develop a broader underpinning of the tragic phenomenon and deal effectively with its performative nature. Often these come from fields of study which, without claiming exclusivity, acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of ancient tragedy and articulate the phenomenon beyond literary narratives. As Walter J. Ong proposes, alternative critiques 'can be reconstructed by careful study of the verse itself, once one puts aside the assumptions about expression and thought processes engrained in the psyche by generations of literate culture'.[24]

Two critical frameworks relevant to the study of ancient tragedy that respond to Ong's proposal are musicality and orality. Musicologists often refer to tragedy when dealing with ancient Greek musical development. A good example is Andrew Barker's articulation of the tragic form when he explains that:

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the words of the tragedies are by no means all dialogue, spoken conversation advancing or deepening the action. . . . But a large proportion of each play consists of formal constituted songs, accompanied by the *aulos* and choreographed for dance. The pace, rhythm, and mood of the dance movements are extraordinarily varied, and at least in the earlier plays much of the effectiveness of a performance must have depended on its expressive choreography.[25]

Barker's claims, particularly his reference to dialogue with which I will engage further below, are of direct relevance to the focus of this article in terms of the extent to which the effectiveness of ancient tragedy – including the generation of action in the abundantly discussed plot – depended on writing rather than on performance. One may, of course, argue that, like Dorsch, Barker responds to a critical agenda which underpins his perspective. However, musical underpinnings similar to Barker's are not exclusive to musicologists. Classics scholar Peter Wilson claims that 'ancient Greek theatre was a fundamentally musical experience'.[26]

Music never leaves ancient drama, which at least until Plato's day remains within the broad Greek category of *mousikē* (that integral unity of poetry, music and dance whose many manifestations constituted one of the basic forms of socialization in Greek society). Tragedy was much closer to what we might term 'choral opera' than 'theatre': all of its poetry – even the purely spoken dialogue – had the rhythmical and musical quality given by metre, while its choral core – the songs and dances of the chorus that interwove the spoken parts – were full-scale, complex productions of rigorous, highly trained dance steps, group singing from the twelve or fifteen choreuts, . . . all to the penetrating sound of the *aulos*.[27]

These, and similar arguments, impact on contemporary perspectives that question the outcomes of talmudic accounts of literary analyses of ancient tragedy.

Musicology is not alone in its incredulity towards literary narratives which for centuries have shaped our understanding of tragedy. The study of oral traditions is another field of scholarship that is particularly inimical to exclusively literary perspectives. Ong sheds light on the matter when he argues that:

Despite the oral roots of all verbalization, the scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamoured for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention.[28]

Ong's argument is significantly relevant in view of the fact that ancient Greek tragedy, as already mentioned, developed within a cultural context – the Mediterranean in the fifth century BCE – that was predominantly oral. The implications of this are far-reaching. The moment we insert into the tragic equation the oral premise, the performative element assumes a pivotal role. As Ruth Scodel puts it,

Oral theory began by recognizing the centrality of the performance event, and it considered mainly the perspective of the performer, [placing] great emphasis on composition-in-performance and on the difference between oral and written culture.[29]

If, in investigating tragedy in ancient Greece, the broader cultural context is acknowledged and orality is included as critical backdrop, associations between tragedy and literature start to emerge as ontologically improbable – and anything but obvious.

A Form Not Yet Dramatic

The study of oral traditions deals with oral poetry, its composition, and essential performative transmission procedures. Orality, as critical backdrop, plays a decisive role when investigating the genealogy of the tragic event and the praxes and processes that led to its emergence. As Thomas argues, 'both oral tradition and memory are culturally determined, and that, again, forces us back to the specifics of Greek culture'.[30]

The cultural context within which ancient tragedy developed is one where oral and written traditions lived side by side and where the probability is that the oral was still considered as more prominent than the written. What seems not to be a matter of contention is, therefore, the performative

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nature of poetry of which tragedy was but one example among a myriad of other poetic expressions.

In view of the oral premise, Hans-Thies Lehmann's claim that no tragic experience can exist without theatrical – i.e. performed – experience, a point which according to him we need to keep reminding ourselves of so as to 'prevent reducing the tragic to literature',[31] is appropriate. It leads Lehmann to argue that 'ancient tragedy is not (yet) "dramatic" in the sense of the term that has been operative since the Renaissance'.[32] This claim resonates well with the alternative perspectives provided by musicality and orality, and is indicative of why any account of tragedy *must* take into consideration the interdisciplinary complexity of the tragic phenomenon.

The alternative perspectives above explain why the twenty-first century started with a kindled need for a 'vocabulary with which to express the fundamental shift in the dramaturgical landscape'.[33] To develop such vocabulary, and the critical awareness it implies, we need to distance ourselves from what Duška Radosavljević rightly refers to as traditional associations of dramaturgy with text-based theatre,[34] to be better equipped to deal with the literature–performance problematic.

Central to any debate in this respect is the concept of drama which, as Christopher Balme puts it, is what 'is being seriously challenged by a growing number of performances so that an alternative term is needed to encompass an operatic score, a dance choreography, a commedia dell'arte scenario, or a "storyboard" such as that used by Robert Wilson as a point of departure for his productions'.[35] Balme's articulation of the problem is particularly apposite in the case of ancient Greek tragedy, developed as it were during a time when poets 'did not necessarily write down the poem until fairly late in the process of composition'.[36] It follows that the concept of drama, together with the literary foundations of dramatic composition that underpin it, are not sufficient to articulate the tragic phenomenon.

As Lehmann puts it, when he claims that ancient tragedy is essentially predramatic,

> the modern idea of psychological identification and empathy . . . does not hold for the ancient theatre, with its masks, its ceremonial features and its quasi-ritualistic, public character; . . . ancient theatre must also be distinguished from the dramatic theatre that developed from the Renaissance on.[37]

It makes critical sense for us today to reconsider the tragic phenomenon in terms of performance and inject into the dramaturgical equation the performative element. This would allow us to articulate dramaturgical process as performative rather than exclusively dramatic or literary procedures.

The Limits of Literary Critiques

The performance matrix tilts dramaturgical responsibility towards the performers without a buffer zone between them and authorship, something which was already happening in ancient Greece when the poet and performer were one and when the playwright was also an actor in his own plays. Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, in their historical account of Ancient Greek theatre, explain that:

> originally the actor and the dramatist were one. Separation of the two functions did not begin until early in the fifth century when Aeschylus introduced a second actor. Playwrights continued to act in their own plays, however, until Sophocles stopped acting in about 468.[38]

Following the end of acting practices by playwrights, a process began that would take centuries to unfold. Through this process theatre continued its development towards the dramatic and dialogic path, until dialogue would be established as a staple element in early modern conceptions of drama. As Peter Szondi explains, 'the absolute dominance of dialogue – that is, of interpersonal communication – reflects the fact that the drama consists only of the reproduction of interpersonal relations, is only cognizant of what shines forth within this sphere'.[39] Interpersonal communication is carried forth via the dialogue, whose medium is the verbal form.[40] Here the link between author and dialogue is important in

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view of the fact that dialogue is generated by the dramatist who, according to Szondi, is absent from the drama: 'He is not the one who speaks, he institutes discussion.'[41]

This leads Szondi to argue that 'as a time-bound concept [drama] stands for a specific literary-historical event – namely the drama as it arose in Elizabethan England'.[42] Like Lehmann, Szondi is direct in his claim that 'working within a historical frame of reference also eliminates Greek tragedy from consideration, since its being can be examined only *under a different set of conditions*'.[43] This different set of conditions calls for some further reflections on why literary and dramatic critiques are essentially limiting with respect to ancient tragedy.

As a literary-historical concept, drama is associated with the author and the play text they produce which, as Eli Rosik explains, is 'usually known in a printed format and meant to be performed on stage, in contrast to the "performance-text" '.[44] He continues:

> In recent research, however, focus on the performance text reveals that the play text is predominantly a design for dialogue, or rather predominantly verbal interaction . . . . In this sense, it is not different from designs for other aspects of the performance-text, such as set, costume, or lighting. The implication is that the play text is a deficient text, particularly because it lacks non-verbal elements typical of the performance text which can disambiguate the verbal ones.[45]

Slow Development of Dialogic Interaction

In this light, the concept of drama poses three central problems with respect to its application to ancient tragedy: first, the institutional position of the author – which may work in terms of modern drama but is essentially oxymoronic to the oral context of ancient Greece; second, the importance given to dialogic interaction as a key component of drama; and third, its lack of consideration of the performative element. What modern theory considers as key tenets of dramatic procedures are either inadequate to deal with the tragic phenomenon or were arguably not even conceivable for ancient poets, let alone applied. Lehmann sheds further light on this issue:

> Tragedy did not achieve form because dialogue and drama were sought. Instead, dramatic development represented a secondary effect, stemming from a new form of discourse that had a wholly different orientation. It shifted the focus of attention on to the *simultaneous presence of voices*; its 'dramatic' beginnings lay in the hero's emergence from the choral collective and in the *messenger speech.* Subsequently, the latter was often judged an archaism and a problem – on the basis of a norm uncritically applied to Attic tragedy from without. The more logical conclusion, given that the messenger speech occurs at the very beginnings of tragedy, would have been that it represents one of its core sites of meaning. A one-sided emphasis on dialogue buries the all-important question concerning the liberation of voice(s). Aeschylus' pieces make it clear that the voice does not provide a medium for answering others so much as the means by which principal characters, messengers, and the chorus more or less take up and continue what has just been said or sung. It follows, then – as scholars have often observed – that in tragedy, and especially when it proves 'most dialogical', the highpoints of verbal battles feature no real communication; instead, as in the deceitful exchange between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, or in the quarrels between Creon and Antigone or Jason and Medea, the characters 'talk right past each other'.[46]

The way Lehmann articulates his argument is indicative of the highly speculative nature of various assumptions made via literary–dramatic critiques. Even if we acknowledge that ancient tragedy started to develop what may be considered as basic dialogic interaction between characters, this development would not reach full maturity during the lifetime of any of the tragic poets active in ancient Greece. Furthermore, dialogic interactions as framed by modern critiques will be few and far between in ancient tragedy.

The Chorus and the Characters

To elaborate further I refer to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon,* Sophocles' *Antigone,* and Euripides' *Medea* to compare the number of lines performed by the chorus and by the actors. This will be followed by statistics related to lines of direct dialogue in the three tragic scripts.

In *Agamemnon*, the chorus is assigned 816 lines out of a total of 1,673. This amounts to 49 per cent of Aeschylus' script. In the case of

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Antigone, Sophocles makes the chorus perform 302 out of the 1,353 lines of the tragedy. This constitutes 22 per cent of the script. In *Medea,* chorus interventions are limited to 242 out of the total 1,419 lines – only 17 per cent of the full script. There was thus a considerable difference between Aeschylus' use of the chorus – employed for practically half the tragedy – and Euripides', with one-fifth of the entire script.

What emerge from this comparison are aspects of tragic performance that are often ignored when applying literary analytic strategies. These include the performative roles of the chorus and of the actor-playwright. If we follow Aristotle's claim that tragedy developed out of dithyrambic practices – and there is no reason why we should not – the role of the chorus is not that of just another interlocutor in the dialogic process, but rather the original performative agent which triggered performance. Later the chorus will be joined by the actor-playwright who will add the possibility of dialogue to the performance equation of tragedy. However, the gradual, rather than drastic, decrease of the involvement of the chorus is a fundamental aspect of the extent to which dialogic strategies could be employed.

This leads me to consider the lines of direct dialogue present in the three tragedies. To clarify my analysis further, by direct dialogue I mean: first, lines where a basic dimension of communication between characters that may be considered as relevant in terms of the development of action is evident; seccond, lines where, as Patris Pavis explains, 'characters' speeches follow each other at a sufficiently rapid pace';[47] and third, lines where characters are clearly speaking to each other rather than speaking out, or, to use Lehmann's articulation quoted above, where characters are clearly not talking 'right past each other'.[48]

As opposed to later dramatic developments – where, as Szondi claims, dramatic action is mainly generated through the dialogues of the characters – in the case of ancient tragedy dialogic interaction was relatively minimal. This qualifies dramatic action as a highly contested concept with little relevance to ancient tragedy – one that can only be replaced by the notion of performative action as supported by the alternative critical perspectives discussed above.

In the figure opposite we see how, in the *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus uses dialogue for only 19 per cent of the play with 318 lines out of 1,673. Sophocles uses dialogic interaction in 477 out of 1,353 lines which amount to a mere 35 per cent of the whole script. In *Medea* we see an increase to 41 per cent with 586 out of a total of 1,419 lines.

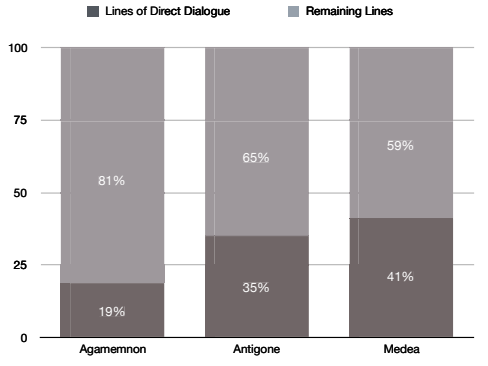
The statistics provided in the figure opposite point at some interesting aspects of early tragic performance.

1. *Ancient tragic dramaturgy.* Dialogic interaction is significantly less in Aeschylus when compared to Sophocles and Euripides who still, however, remain under the 50 per cent mark. As such we need to problematize the concept of dramatic action in terms of the dynamics of dialogue in early tragedy. Rather than character-driven and dialogue-based, the dramaturgies of ancient tragedy are chorus-driven performative dramaturgies. Especially in the case of Aeschylus – with a staggering 81 per cent of lines not involving dialogic interaction and where, in the remaining 19 per cent, interpersonal communication still does not constitute the main driving force of tragic action – our attention necessarily shifts towards the chorus.

2. *The chorus.* As the 49 per cent of chorus lines performed in *Agamemnon* show, the chorus was a key performative agent in early tragedy. In view of its activity in dithyrambic practices which consisted mainly of song and dance, the chorus is a clear indication of the strong performative dimension of ancient Greek tragedy. Through 'dancing, speaking, and singing, the chorus offered the senses a spirit that was invisible and, at the same time, all-too-visible and palpable in the traces it left'.[49] In other words, the chorus gave tragedy those extra layers of experience that literary and dramatic theories do not deal with. The strong association between dithyrambic practices and tragedy, and the

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	Agamemnon	Antigone	Medea
Lines of Direct Dialogue	19	35	41
Remaining Lines	81	65	59



Comparison between lines of direct dialogue and remaining lines in *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, and *Medea*.

eventual transition from one to the other, are indicative, as Rozik argues, that 'oral storytelling can generate a theatrical form, provided that it starts incorporating, even partially, that essential element of theatre: acting'.[50]

The analysis provided here shows that acting (and the performative underpinnings that the term implies) was not only incorporated partially in ancient tragedy but was essentially the main activity of the chorus. As such, the performative constitutes a nodal element of tragic composition and locates performance poetry as the dramaturgical backbone of ancient tragedy.

3. *The performative.* This brings me to the relevance of Aristophanes' claim that Aeschylus was the weightier poet when compared to Euripides. Interestingly, as Wiles puts it,

> Aristotle compares two forms of mimesis when he reports Sophocles' claim to have created people as they ought to be whilst Euripides created them as they are. Missing as usual from this comparison is the figure of Aeschylus, and the theory of mimesis in the *Poetics* fails conspicuously to deal with Aeschylean theatre.[51]

Here it emerges clearly why. Performative elements in Aeschylus were very strong, possibly even stronger than in Euripides, considering that Aeschylean dramaturgies hardly depended on dialogic interaction at all. For Aristophanes, who takes a strategic critical role with his agon in *The Frogs*, the performative elements adopted by Aeschylus were a good enough reason to crown him as winner over Euripides when it comes to the aesthetics of tragedy.

I will not go into the issue of why and how the written text – the drama – gained so much relevance to the point that the performance of tragedy during fifth-century Greece was almost marginalized. What matters to my argument is that exclusive dramatic critiques applied to ancient tragedy over the centuries 'obstructed proper understanding' of it, 'especially the degree to which the emotion [*Bewegtheit*] on display, which was structured by music, rhythm, and dance, differed from the modern idea of spoken drama'.[52]

Before the gradual development of tragedy as a genre which also included dramatic elements, tragic poetry was strongly rooted in oral practices that are best defined in terms of a body–voice dynamic. The gradually shifts to a pen–voice dynamic when theatre performances started to be recorded in writing was a process which would not have been fully established during fifth-century Greece when the tragedies discussed here were composed. This, of course, calls for some reconsiderations of the notion of poetry, specifically the way it is conceived by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

Poetry and Aristotle's Use of the Term

When reflecting on the profile of the tragic poet, Wiles remarks that Aristotle's 'premise is that the poet should in the first instance be a maker of storylines and not verses, attaching to the story language and movement'.[53] Although not intended as a direct critique of the broader notion of poetry, Wiles's remark justifies the need to reconsider Aristotle's use of the term 'poetry'.

Perspectives which, like Wiles's, endorse the oral critical backdrop I discussed above,

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reject immediate and exclusive associations of poetry with writing processes. Of course, no one would cast a shadow of doubt on the importance of Aristotle's *Poetics* to our understanding of ancient Greek tragedy. The same, however, cannot be said about the text's interpretations which in their vast majority come from the literary field. The exclusive literary methodologies generated by these critiques pose a considerable hermeneutic problem when it comes to the performative implications that the term 'poetry' carried with it in fifth-century Greece.

A quick glance at some of the prominent commentaries and translations published since the turn of the twentieth century sheds light on the magnitude of the problematic. S. H. Butcher in his *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, first published in 1895, states that Aristotle's 'love of logical distinctions, his tendency to rigid demarcation, is shown even in the province of literary criticism by the care with which in the *Poetics* he maps out the subordinate divisions of his subject'.[54] Gilbert Murray's opinion in his preface to Ingram Bywater's translation, published in 1920, is that 'few of the great works of ancient Greek literature are easy reading. . . . And the *Poetics* cannot be accounted an exception.'[55]

Performance Ignored in New Translations

Apart from the fact that these two texts were published in the wake of Nietzsche's critique which, as we have seen, seriously questions ancient tragedy's literary framings, they appeared during a time – the turn of the twentieth century – when strong claims for theatre as an art form independent from literature were being made by the likes of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia. The problem with Butcher's and Murray's claims is precisely the fact that they ignore the critical currents that were conspicuously evident when they were made.

During the second half of the twentieth century, when performance theory started to emerge and contribute to important critical shifts regarding the nature of performance events and the processes that underpin them, translations of Aristotle's text continued to appear still insisting on the *Poetics'* relevance as a key text in literary criticism. Stephen Halliwell in the introduction to his 1987 translation explains how it was 'with the fresh interest of Italian humanists in the sixteenth century that it assumed a central place in current literary theory and criticism'.[56] He also explicitly states that when working on his commentary he 'had in mind chiefly such readers as serious students of Greek literature in translation, of drama, and of European literature in general'.[57]

Richard Janko in the introduction to his 1987 translation states that 'Aristotle was the first person ever to write a treatise devoted to literary theory'.[58] His list of intended readers includes 'students of literature, philosophy, literary theory, and specialists in Greek literature and philosophy'.[59] Scholars engaged with performance, which by the 1980s was an acknowledged field of academic research, are conspicuously left out of Halliwell's and Janko's lists of potential users, although their respective texts were published two decades after Richard Schechner's *Essays on Performance* in 1977 – essays which as Schechner claims were written between 1966 and 1976 and were to constitute his seminal *Performance Theory* published in 1988.[60]

Schechner's framing of a theory of performance had an important impact on contemporary understanding of and research into performance practices. Like Butcher and Murray before them, Halliwell and Janko bypass the innovative critical developments that were already clear at the time when their publications appeared.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that poetry in the translations mentioned above is considered exclusively as literature. Such exclusivity is immediately evident with the first sentence of the *Poetics* where the term 'poetry' is neither defined nor contextualized by the translators. Instead it is 'uncritically' (to use Lehmann's term) understood only within the trajectory of the translator's literary framings. However, if we look at Aristotle's first two words '*peri poietikes*' (περὶ ποιητικῆς) and consider the various

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possible meanings of *poietikes*, the indications are that poetry as a literary art form is probably not what Aristotle was referring to. Defining and contextualizing the term would therefore assume key critical importance, especially, as I will elaborate, in terms of its performative underpinnings.

'Poietic', not 'Poetic'

'*Peri*' means 'about'. The weight is on the second word, '*poietikes*'. The Liddell and Scott Greek-English lexicon gives the following as possible meanings of the word 'poietikes' (ποιητικός): 'capable of making, creative, productive; the productive arts; so as to produce'. All these meanings have active and process-related underpinnings which do not refer to any definite art form. As such, the impacts of translating the first sentence of the *Poetics* as referring exclusively to poetry as a literary art form have serious repercussions, not least because, in its use, Aristotle announces his project. George Whalley, in his translation and commentary published posthumously in 1997, engages with the problem of translating the first sentence:

> The opening words are *peri poietikes* [*technes*] – from which the book takes its title. Neither 'poetry' nor 'the art of poetry' is quite right. The root of *poietike* – *poiein* (to make, do, fashion, perform) – is a strongly active verb that will dominate the whole discussion in the sense 'to make'. . . . I have written *poietic* art rather than *poetic* art, partly to emphasize the sense of 'making' (and the poet as 'maker'), partly as a reminder that Aristotle does not recognize a distinction between 'art' and 'craft'.[61]

Whalley's comments are critically relevant to the broader context of the performative dimension of tragedy which Aristotle deals with. His articulation of '*poietike*' as 'to make, do, fashion, perform', resonates effectively with acknowledged definitions of 'performance'. If used as foreground to understanding the *Poetics*, they open up interesting territories for investigation.

In fact, Whalley translates the first sentence as: 'The poietic [art] in itself and the various kinds of it, and what [particular] effect each kind has, and how plots should be put together if the making is to prosper'.[62] Words in square brackets are not found in the original. Whalley explains that these are 'introduced by the translator in the cause of sense and fluency'.[63] Others like '*poietic*' he transliterated rather than translated, to avoid limiting and conditioning their meaning.

While Whalley is still directing his translation and commentary to students of English literature,[64] his work assumes levels of critical responsibility which acknowledges the complex nature of the phenomenon he deals with. His choice not to translate '*poietikes*' and his use of the active 'making' at the end of the sentence are crucial.[65]

Both mirror similar concerns expressed by Gerald F. Else in his *Aristotle's Poetics: the Argument* published in 1957. Although still framing his analysis around 'the application of Aristotle's words to literary criticism and history',[66] Else has issues with the way Aristotle's first sentence is often translated when he claims that 'something even more essential is missing'.[67] He elaborates on his concerns as follows:

> The word ποιητικῆ in itself ('constructive' or productive' *sc.* 'art') is highly general and can refer to any kind of 'making': the production of ships, building, knives, clothing etc., etc. How is ποιητικῆ, the 'poetic' art in the special sense related to this broad field of productive arts, to ποιητικῆ in general? Elsewhere Aristotle gives scattered hints at a general classification of human activity into 'theoretical', 'practical', and 'poetic', or knowing (i.e. knowing for its own sake), doing, and making. But it is notorious that he never achieves a thoroughly consistent use of these terms and that he has not left us an over-all 'system' even of his own works.[68]

As Else claims, Aristotle neither defines nor achieves any consistency with the term '*poietikes*' (ποιητικῆς). Such inconsistency is, in fact, further proof of the speculative nature of any associations with literature that most commentators assume the term to possess.

Aristotle's inconsistency of usage, together with his rather uncharacteristic lack of definition of the term, can only be explained in relation to the cultural context within which he was developing his critique: namely the oral context and the performative

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implications it carries with it. The performance dimension of poetry was so ingrained in ancient Greek society that for Aristotle to explain what he meant by '*poietikes*' would equate with explaining what such terms as 'internet', 'email', or 'hashtag' mean to a twenty-first-century audience.

Acknowledging the oral context of Greek culture to which Aristotle still had access would not be just important but critically inevitable, unless, as Lehmann puts it, we want to fall victims of 'willful ignorance'.[69] It gives considerable weight to the active and performative underpinnings which, as explained by Whalley, impregnate the *Poetics*. It also casts some very serious doubts on the critical validity of applying literary and dramatic theories – developed by early modern scholars almost a millennium later – when engaging with a critical commentary that essentially deals with a performance event.

Conclusion

Centuries of critical accounts framed around literary agendas have separated scholarship from some fundamental elements of ancient Greek tragedy. The reasons for this, because of the interdisciplinary complexity of the phenomenon acknowledged at the start of this article, are various. The exclusive attention given to the written text rather than the performed event is, without a doubt, one of these reasons.

There is still, two decades into the twenty-first century, no conclusive evidence by historians (theatre or otherwise) that indicates with certainty that the writing of tragedies was an obvious procedure in fifth-century Greece. Nor is there any certainty that the tragedians who wrote down their texts did so before the tragedies were performed. What cannot be disputed is that *some* tragedies were scripted. *How* and *when* these tragedies were scripted remains, in view of the respective cultural context, a matter unresolved.

The activity of tragic poets was intrinsically interdisciplinary. They 'taught the roles to their actors face to face, with the correct intonations, movement, and music, and there is no evidence that actors ever received a script'.[70] When this interdisciplinary profile of the poet is coupled with the strong performative traditions of fifth-century Greece which still persist in the Mediterranean basin until the present day, the least plausible conclusion would actually be that tragedies were scripted before performance. In view of the evidence that keeps emerging in this direction it cannot, therefore, be claimed with critically sufficient certainty that what Aristotle was referring to in the *Poetics* were exclusively authored texts.

Aristotle speaks of poetry which, as I argued via Whalley and Else, does not necessarily mean authored texts. Apart from the fact that the issue of authorship is extremely hazy in oral cultures, it remains unclear whether it was common practice at all for tragedies to be written down – by which I mean that some poets may have opted not to resort to the written form to record their practices. It also remains unclear whether, in cases when tragedies were written down, this happened before, during, or after they were performed.

Of course, we cannot ignore records of scripted tragedies that survived. However, we need to reflect seriously on the extent to which these surviving examples can be considered as representative of the tragedies performed in ancient Greece. Of the Greek tragedians active during the hundred years that constitute the fifth century BCE, only 32 scripts by three – Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – survive. We have nothing by Choerilus of Athens, a poet credited with more than 150 tragedies and with 13 festival victories. Nothing by Phrynichus about whose *The Capture of Miletus* the historian Herodotus writes that during its performance 'the whole theatre fell to weeping'.[71] And nothing by Agathon of Athens, the tragic poet mentioned by Aristotle in the *Poetics* where he is credited with introducing 'imported songs' to tragedy.[72]

Nor have we surviving records of tragedies by a myriad of other poets who were active in ancient Greece.[73] All that remains is 32 scripts – a tiny drop in the immense ocean of a whole century during which the ancient Greeks composed, extemporized, and per-

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formed poetry on virtually every social occasion, including funerals, weddings, victories, and any other religious or civic celebration they organized. The fact that nothing else survived and that the tragic poets who composed this profusion of performance activity are either known to us only via references by their contemporaries or remain anonymous, may very well be, as Thomas argues, due to the 'prosaic reason that they did not produce written records'.[74]

Such a claim jeopardizes the highly conjectural conclusion that what did not make it to our libraries has been lost. Performance criticism, because of its very nature in dealing with ephemeral phenomena, operates via critical trajectories that would hardly ever lead to such conclusions. It is, therefore, not surprising that current scholarship is questioning the perspectives provided by literary methodologies when it comes to ancient Greek tragedy. As Wiles puts it, 'the history of Greek theatre must be understood as the history of bodies, not as the history of words emanating from great but disembodied minds'.[75]

The notion of performance dramaturgies I have sought to articulate in this article, via alternative frameworks which deal with the broad spectrum of performed poetic activity in ancient Greece, critically destabilizes the literary–dramatic tropes developed since early modernity. In this regard, performance-oriented scholarship and performance criticism continue to manifest themselves as the appropriate critical backdrops when dealing with the tragedies composed by tragic poets in ancient Greece as well as critical texts which, like Aristotle's, investigate one of the earliest performance phenomena to emerge from the ancient world.

Notes and Rererences

1. T. S. Dorsch, trans., *Classical Literary Criticism: Aristotle, Horace, Longinus* (London; New York: Penguin, 1965), p. 9.
2. Ibid., my emphasis.
3. Ibid., my emphasis.
4. Ibid., my emphasis.
5. Ibid., p. 7, my emphasis.
6. Ibid., p. 8.
7. Matthew Wright, *The Comedian as Critic: Greek Old Comedy and Poetics* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), p. 37.
8. Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 124.
9. Aristophanes, *Aristophanes II: The Peace, The Birds, The Frogs*, trans. B. B. Rogers, (London; New York: Loeb Classical Library, Heinemann, 1924), p. 426–7.
10. Carl Anderson and Keith T. Dix, 'Λάβε τὸ βυβλίον: Orality and Literacy in Aristophanes', in Ruth Scodel, ed., *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 77.
11. Ibid.
12. For reasons of space I will not elaborate here on how Nietzsche engages with notions of interdisciplinarity in *The Birth of Tragedy*. I deal with the matter extensively in Frendo, 'Nietzsche's Musical Perspectivism: Interdisciplinary Ontologies in Performance', in Stefan Aquilina and Malaika Sarco-Thomas, ed., *Interdisciplinarity in the Performing Arts* (Malta: Malta University Press, 2018).
13. For a discussion on references to embodied practices in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, see Mario Frendo, 'Embodied Musicality: Nietzsche, Grotowski. and Musicalized Processes in Theatre Making', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, VII, No. 2 (June 2013), p. 207–19.
14. Frendo, 'Nietzsche's Musical Perspectivism', p. 125.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 81.
16. Jorge Luis Borges *Collected Fictions*, trans Andrew Harley (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 241.
17. Ibid.
18. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 108.
19. Thomas, p. 3.
20. David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 2.
21. Ibid., original emphasis.
22. Thomas, p. 2.
23. Ibid., p. 1.
24. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the World* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 21.
25. Andrew Barker, *Greek Musical Writings I: The Musician and His Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 62.
26. Peter Wilson, 'The Musicians among the Actors', in Pat Easterling and Edith Hall, ed., *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), p. 39.
27. Ibid., original emphasis.
28. Ong, p. 8.
29. Ruth Scodel, ed., *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 1.
30. Thomas, p. 109.
31. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.
32. Ibid., p. 6.
33. Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane, ed., *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xi.

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34. Duška Radosavljević, 'Towards Performed Dramaturgy', in Trencsényi and Cochrane, op. cit., p. 68.
35. Christopher Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 125.
36. Thomas, p. 124.
37. Lehmann, p. 208.
38. Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre* (Boston, MA; London: Pearson, 2010), p. 19.
39 Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 8.
40. Ibid., p. 7.
41. Ibid., p. 8.
42. Ibid., p. 5.
43. Ibid., my emphasis.
44. Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. 23.
45. Ibid., p. 24.
46. Lehmann, p. 196, original emphasis
47. Patris Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 97
48. Although it is not in the scope of this article to delve into the nature of dialogue it is worth noting that different analytic frameworks formulate an understanding of dialogue not only in terms of aesthetic and stylistic matters but also in terms of socio-political, cultural, and religious issues. For instance, notions of dialogue which developed since early modernity were in more ways than one framed around western monotheistic cultures and the logocentric perspectives implicit in the centrality of a single deity. However, ancient Greece was a polytheistic society with respect to which caution must be exerted when applying critical backdrops that have essentially monotheistic foundations. It is, therefore, pertinent to point out, as does Lehmann, 'that the dispositive of ancient tragedy formed part of a polytheistic universe that held heroes, gods, masks, and the play of voices at the ready – that it offered a form of theatricality not yet subject to the dictates of logical abstraction that monotheistic thinking later produced' (p. 206). Other aspects already mentioned in the article include interpersonal communication and its intrinsic association with psychological identification, which is virtually absent from ancient tragedy.
49. Lehmann, p. 197.
50. Rozik, p. 47.
51. Wiles, p. 178.
52. Lehmann, p. 193.
53. Wiles, p. 177.
54. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London: Macmillan, 1932), p. 113.
55. Gilbert Murray, in Ingram Bywater, *On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 4.
56. Stephen Halliwell, *The* Poetics *of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 1987), p. 1.
57. Ibid., p. vii.
58. Richard Janko, *Aristotle Poetics* (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. ix.
59. Ibid., p. vi.
60. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. ix.
61. George Whalley, *Aristotle's* Poetics, ed. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (London; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p. 44.
62. Ibid., p. 45.
63. Ibid., p. 36.
64. Ibid., p. x.
65. Cf. S. H. Butcher: 'I propose to treat of Poetry in itself, and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to enquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem' (Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, p. 7); Ingram Bywater: 'Our subject being Poetry, I propose to speak not only of the art in general but also of its species and their respective capacities; of the number and nature of the constituent parts of a poem' (Bywater, *On the Art of Poetry*, p. 23); T. S. Dorsch: 'Under the general heading being the art of poetry, I propose not only to speak about this art itself, but also to discuss the various kinds of poetry and their characteristic functions, the types of plot-structure that are required if a poem is to succeed' (Dorsch, *Classical Literary Criticism*, p. 31); Stephen Halliwell: 'To discuss the art of poetry in general, as well as the potential of each of its types; to explain the unity of plot required for successful poetic composition' (Halliwell, *The* Poetics *of Aristotle*, p. 31); Richard Janko: 'Our topic is poetry itself and its kinds, and what potential each has; how plots should be constructed if the composition is to turn out well' (Janko, *Aristotle Poetics,* p. 1). Halliwell and Janko use the term 'composition' which is not necessarily an active term. In the case of Halliwell reference to 'poetic composition' makes his translation essentially tautological.
66. Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: the Argument* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. viii.
67. Ibid., p. 2.
68. Ibid.
69. Lehmann, p. 193.
70. Wiles, p. 167.
71. Herodotus, *Herodotus III Books V–VII*, trans. A. D. Godley, (London; New York: Loeb Classical Library, Heinemann, 1921), p. 167.
72. Aristotle, in Whalley, p. 123.
73. For a comprehensive account of tragic poets active during fifth-century BCE Greece from whom we have no surviving written documentation, see Matthew Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy: Volume I, Neglected Authors* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
74. Thomas, p. 106.
75. Wiles, p. 171.

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