

INTRODUCTION

Antonis K. Petrides

POSTCLASSICAL TRAGEDY AND THE THEORIES OF DECLINE

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

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

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

In fact, the contest of the *Frogs* evokes the first epirrhematic *agōn* of the *Clouds*. In the latter play, Worse Argument and Better Argument are mutually

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

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

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

Be that as it may, the discourse of the *Frogs* was viewed both in ancient and modern times as a legitimate encapsulation of the history of tragedy after the fifth century — namely, as the first piece of evidence attesting to the formulation of a tragic canon, which distinguished the three great poets of the fifth century (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides) from their lesser contemporaries and degenerate descendants.⁴ Nietzsche, too, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), to name but one notable modern case, sides unequivocally with Aristophanes’ perceived judgement, speaking of ‘wicked Euripides’, whose ‘sophistical dialectic’ killed the spirit of tragedy, and thus he was ultimately deserted by Dionysus.⁵ As Csapo *et al.* note (2014: 1-3), the ultimate modern origin of Nietzsche’s thesis, along with practically all other pejorative approaches to postclassical tragedy until the mid-20th century, was the ‘organic’ model for the history of Greek tragedy developed by the Schlegel brothers.⁶ This model, which was the result of misunderstanding Aristotle as much as Aristophanes, saw the fifth century, in biological terms, as the ‘bloom’ and the fourth as the ‘decay’ of the genre. The Schlegels’ approach was firmly rooted in Romanticism and German nationalism; when transplanted to Britain from late 19th to mid-20th century, it was further enveloped by the nostalgia of an Empire lost: for British theatre historians

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

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

⁵ Geuss and Speirs 1999: 54.

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

writing at the time of their own Empire's decay, the loss of Athenian hegemony coincided with the vanishing vitality of tragedy. In the 1950s and '60s it was the Cold War and (mostly French) structuralism with their binary schemata that determined the critical agenda. The prevailing conviction of this time was that tragic drama was inextricably linked to the Athenian polis and Athenian democratic self-definition. The upshot of such a view was natural enough: as soon as the context of performances was changed (by exporting the plays to other cities), the real 'moment' of tragedy (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990) was gone.⁷

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

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

Nevertheless, deep-seated prejudice dies hard. For instance, even the monograph often credited for having redirected attention to postclassical tragedy, namely Xanthakis-Karamanos (1980), still brims with mixed perspectives, and for all its merits, it fails to dispense with the traditional myths. This book's laudable goal is to assess later tragedy more favourably, not as the unworthy heir to the throne, but as embodying a positive 'new direction' (p. 3), in response to the wider transformations of the period. However, despite assurances that 'tragedy was never cultivated with more enthusiasm than during the fourth century' (p. 20), or that 'the poetic value [of the new playwrights] should not be underestimated' (p. 23), the discourses of old still

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

⁸ See, for instance, Ghiron-Bistagne 1974; Kuch 1993.

⁹ Csapo *et al.* 2014: 17.

resonate in the author's assertion that the 'new direction' to which fourth-century tragedy turned brought about nothing short of 'the end of serious drama', which was now replaced by a so-called 'anti-tragedy' (p. 3). Xanthakis-Karamanos assumes — despite the fact that the remains of fourth-century drama are too scattered to support such sweeping generalisations — that fourth-century playwrights en bloc developed a strong taste for the rhetorical, the pathetic and the sensational, as well as for the carefully crafted romantic plot. In her view, the fourth century substituted 'the highly tragic issues' of fifth-century drama with little more than *pièces bien faites*, which brought about a 'disintegration' (p. 8) of that 'perfect blending' between speech, song and delivery achieved in classical tragedy (p. 6). In departing 'from the severity and purity of classic style' (p. 6), the fourth century caused a gradual 'withering' of the 'inner power of tragedy' (p. 12). As it transpires, the 'anti-tragedy' theory, far from being a new, more approving hermeneutic model for understanding Greek tragedy after the fifth century, is practically a masked reformulation of Schlegel's model of organic decline.

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

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

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

¹¹ Csapo *et al.* 2014: 24.

Apart from its prejudicial character, the ‘decline’ narrative rests on inherently problematic historical premises. Proponents of this view, of course, refer to the notorious ‘death of the polis’ and the supposedly concomitant ‘decline in the political energy’ of theatre, which, as Xanthakis-Karamanos opines, resulted in the ascendancy of ‘melodrama’ in the fourth century. Melodrama, which Xanthakis-Karamanos equates with the aforementioned ‘anti-tragedy’, is imagined to have been more attractive to audiences in a period in which people were too weary of war and economic hardship to stomach ‘true tragedies’,¹² and in which an expanding theatre market demanded more exportable plays with lighter, more universal (i.e. not Athenocentric) themes. As current research has shown, however, this view is simply unhistorical. To start from the obvious, as evidenced by performances of Athenian drama outside Athens as early as the time of Aeschylus,¹³ exportability was never a problem in the case of tragedy, whose myths were already Panhellenic and whose specifically Athenian resonances, accentuated by the institutional and civic context rather than by the mythic material itself, could easily be redefined.¹⁴ More importantly, historians have demonstrated that despite the gradual formation of larger commonwealths in the course of the fourth century — especially, of course, after the conquests of Alexander — the polis and its old institutions retained their significance as the fundamental framework of social organisation and culture.¹⁵ Furthermore, research into none other than the supposedly ‘apolitical’ and ‘escapist’ Menander has shown convincingly that such dominant themes as marriage, procreation, gender or class may have been Panhellenic, and thus transposable to various contexts, but they could all remain pertinent to the Athenian polis itself.¹⁶ In other words, judging by Menander, fourth-century theatre could still be energetically polis-oriented, even if the polis was now increasingly integrated into larger political formations; it could still engage with civic ideology and the issues of polis life, even if the polis itself was no

¹² Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 41.

¹³ See for example Dearden 1990, Bosher 2012a.

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

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

¹⁶ See, e.g., Lape 2004 and 2010.

longer democratic; and, of course, it could still be relevant in and to Athens, even if its themes were transferrable to other socio-political milieux. Even Menander's comedy, therefore, which scholars used to regard as mere light entertainment (being itself supposedly a token of decline compared to the Aristophanic political extravaganzas), has been revealed not to eschew the 'serious issues' and to engage dynamically with the hegemonic discourses of the polis. If this is so, then it would be rash to suppose, based on the little evidence we have, that the audiences of contemporary tragedy had lost their tolerance of and taste for 'true tragedies' or that politically-minded (that is to say, polis-oriented) tragic narratives were exclusively reliant upon the supremacy of democratic Athens. The fact that fourth-century tragic theatre was now a Panhellenic phenomenon developing in new socio-political environments need not mean 'the end of serious drama'.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN TRAGEDY AFTER THE FIFTH CENTURY

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

The process of exporting Athenian theatre beyond the confines of Attica to be performed in the new-fangled religious and secular festivals multiplying everywhere¹⁹ accelerated to such an extent that by the third century BC Athens was merely one of many great hubs of theatrical activity, albeit arguably the most venerable still. The end of Athenocentrism in the fourth century was a universal phenomenon, which did not concern only the new performance venues. Theatre practitioners, too, including

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

¹⁸ See Hall 2007.

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

playwrights and actors, no longer exclusively (or almost exclusively) originate from Athens. Theatre is now a bona fide international form.

With theatre buildings of increasing grandeur and capacity²⁰ cropping up in every Hellenistic city aspiring to be considered a *polis* (Pausanias, 9.4.1); with an increasing number of rich and powerful patrons (monarchs no less) willing to finance theatrical activity; and with a buzzing trade of theatrical by-products (vase paintings, mosaics, wall paintings, terracotta figurines, masks, even scripts circulating in book form) echoing the performances, theatre became a staple of life throughout the Hellenistic world. The physical space of the theatre was now a locus of multiform civic activity in the context of a new performance culture. From theatrical performances to paratheatrical and theatricalised political events, such as popular assemblies and public displays of magnificence and power by sovereigns,²¹ theatricality engulfed every aspect of public life, addressing audiences fully equipped to 'read' what they saw in minute semiotic detail.²² It even became a metaphor for the vicissitudes of human existence (*theatrum mundi*).²³

For their part, theatre practitioners were now well trained, specialised professionals,²⁴ generously rewarded both in financial terms and in the form of honours, privileges and other distinctions. Their histrionic talents were esteemed and sought after for purposes beyond the theatre: it was not uncommon, for example, for actors to be dispatched to serious diplomatic missions as ambassadors. In a remarkable feat, which surpassed even the organisation of the Homeridae in the late Archaic and classical periods, by the beginning of the 3rd century BC at the latest actors became unionised. Their most important guild,²⁵ the 'Artists of Dionysus' (Διονυσιακοὶ Τεχνῖται), included all theatre practitioners; however, its internal structure was determined by a caste system, which distinguished, for instance,

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

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

²² The point is elaborated in Petrides 2014: 107-13.

²³ See Kokolakis 1960.

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

²⁵ Other guilds, beyond the Artists of Dionysus, also developed over time, such as τὸ Κοινὸν τῶν περὶ τὴν ἰλαρὰν Ἀφροδίτην τεχνιτῶν, which probably comprised mimes; on this organisation see Fountoulakis 2000, Aneziri 2000-2001.

‘protagonists’ from ‘deuteragonists’, i.e. star actors from sideshows. The Artists were powerful institutions, exerting total control over theatrical activity, both in organisational and in artistic terms.²⁶ If Aristotle could complain about the power of actors in his own time (*Rhet.* 1403b33), he had seen nothing yet. For the actors’ superstardom did not manifest itself only in hefty fees and civic honours; actors also influenced the dramaturgy itself, by demanding or encouraging (or even concocting) parts that showcased their diverse skills in gestural language, emotional expression, vocal delivery, mimicry and singing. The mounting demand for theatrical spectacle also gave rise, alongside the traditional full-scale performances, to novel ways of performing tragedy, most prominently in an ‘anthological’ manner, that is, by performing extracts rather than the entire play, either in public or in private occasions hosted by the elite.²⁷ Even the texts of the ‘old tragedies’ — fifth-century tragedies now enjoying the status of canonical works — did not remain untouched by the force of star actors. As the state of our texts evinces, it was not uncommon for actors, who were now both the protagonists and the producers of ‘old tragedies’, to boost their roles, e.g., by protracting some *rhēseis* (set speeches) or by introducing more extensive lyric parts that afforded them further opportunities for virtuoso singing.²⁸

As for the play scripts, the three major tragic playwrights of the fifth century, especially Euripides,²⁹ had enjoyed the status of classic authors already since the beginning of the fourth century. The existence of such a canon is evident in Aristotle (e.g. *Po.* 1449a15-18, 1453a23-30, 1460b33), who may have recognised the odd flash of brilliance in contemporary plays, for example in Astydamos’ *Alcmeon* (*Poet.* 1453b29 = *TrGF* 60 F 1b), which he juxtaposed to the quintessential *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles. Nonetheless, Aristotle, apparently in the belief that *Oedipus*

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

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

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

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

marks the *telos* (the goal towards which the genre strove) and the perfect *physis* (the definitive nature) of tragedy, could not but regard everyone and everything that came after as stages of a slow decline. Canonisation hinged not only on the genuine popular admiration for the commonly acknowledged figureheads of the tragic genre, but also on political and psychological factors. It must be no accident that the Peace of Antalcidas (386 BC), which ended the so-called Corinthian War unfavourably for Athens, coincided with the introduction, albeit *hors concours*, of performances of ‘old tragedy’ in the Great Dionysia.³⁰ This and the other grave military setbacks that befell the Athenians in the course of the fourth century — namely, the humiliation at the so-called Social War (357–55 BC), which resulted in the disbandment of the Second Athenian Confederacy,³¹ and the crushing defeat at Chaeronea by Philip II of Macedon (338 BC), which signalled the end of Athenian political autonomy³² — enveloped the cultural and political might of fifth-century Athens with a nostalgic aura. The statesman Eubulus’ decision, soon after the Social War, to use the budget surplus in order to enhance public festivals³³ and, much more decisively, provide evidence that, just as fast as it was losing its political influence, Athens was reinventing herself as the metropolis of Greek culture. The clear material *presence* of the three great tragedians — of classical grandeur itself — was a big part of this project of Athenian self-reimagining. This presence was impressed upon popular conscience in the 330s, on the initiative of another major political figure of the time, Lycurgus, in two ways: first, by erecting their statues as visual markers of an unsurpassable standard to be revered and looked upon with envy and awe in the refurbished Theatre of Dionysus (which Lycurgus had remade in stone to increase its audience capacity so that it could host more spectators, especially foreign, one might guess);³⁴ and second, by the preparation of an official state edition of the *oeuvres complètes* of ‘the Big Three’ to be cherished as a communal heirloom.³⁵

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

³¹ On the Peace of Antalcidas and the Social War, see Cawkwell 2005: 175–197.

³² On Chaeronea, see Cawkwell 1978.

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

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

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

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

Consequently, the death of Euripides was not ‘the end of an era’³⁸ at all, in the sense of marking the death of theatre or even of tragedy as we know it. The tragic genre continued to develop and even thrive in the fourth century and, in many cases, later. Theatre continued to be practiced and followed enthusiastically, plays were written and produced with increased vitality, and were even perhaps possessed of comparable quality and staying power: not a few fourth-century plays (e.g. Astydamos’ *Hector* and *Parthenopaeus*, Theodectes’ *Lynceus*) acquired the status of classics in their own right, alongside the masterworks of the previous, ‘golden’ era. Periodization, after all, is always a tricky venture, which can obfuscate simple truths:³⁹ as Francis Dunn’s and David Carter’s chapters in this volume show, in postclassical times there was significant *continuity* as well as change in the tragic genre, both as an artistic form and as an ideological (‘educational’) platform of the

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

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

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

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

polis.⁴⁰ Continuity in tragedy was perhaps even stronger than in comedy, which reinvented itself much more drastically during its evolutionary course through the fourth century.

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

Among other negative upshots, in such metadiscursive situations, which brand a whole section of the past as an a priori inferior carry-over, the tendency to fit everything into prefabricated interpretive moulds is almost reflexive. Let one suggestive example suffice. Discussing the so-called Gyges fragment (*TrGF* 2 F 664 = P. Oxy 2382), which is now commonly believed to be Hellenistic,⁴³ Denys Page argued in favour of an early-fifth-century dating, with the following rationale:

Look again at the language and style... we shall find the dignity, simplicity and reserve of the early style [*sc.* the style of Aeschylus’ time]; where in it shall we find any of those features which we associate with Alexandrian literature of any type? ⁴⁴

In other words, for Page the fragment’s perceived quality alone was sufficient to militate against a later dating. Such circular logic is not uncommon in these situations:

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

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

⁴² On ‘coming after’ see Hunter 2008: 8-26.

⁴³ Lesky 1953; Kotlińska-Toma 2015: 178-85; Hornblower, this volume.

⁴⁴ Quoted by Hunter 2008: 11 from Page’s Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge; see further Page 1952.

Page presupposes from the start that the fragment is early classical, the implication being that certain qualitative traits can only belong to this period, and then returns to the fragment to magnify whatever virtues it may have, in order for it to conform to his preconceived ideas. The so-called post-classical tragedy at large has been habitually put under similar distorting lenses. This volume will insist that *any* totalising aesthetic judgements, either derogatory or laudatory, on material that is scattered and heterogeneous, to say the least, should be withheld, or even better avoided altogether.

THE STATUS QUAESTIONIS

Given the vagaries of periodization and canonisation, as well as the regrettable state of our textual evidence, it seems natural enough that postclassical tragedy was slow to grasp the serious attention of scholars. Interest in postclassical tragedy was directed at best towards the edition and philological study of individual fragments and, more rarely, playwrights,⁴⁵ with no large-scale commentary (apart from the short yet illuminating notes in the successive editions of the *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*) or a synthetic monograph available until the early 1980s.

The remains of the vast postclassical tragic production are indeed not particularly fascinating. For the most part, what we possess are deplorably short and uninformative book fragments reflecting the specific interests of the authors that quote them: for example, gnomic utterances suiting the *Anthologium* of Stobaeus, trifling curiosities reflecting the eccentricities of Athenaeus' dining aesthetes, and other sporadic survivals. The small number of papyri that have resurfaced over the years have certainly contributed to our understanding of the period but have not changed the general picture a great deal.⁴⁶

Even more disappointingly, the few substantial texts that do survive are either singular, perhaps experimental, phenomena, or they are likely to be otherwise

⁴⁵ Bartsch 1843 (on Chaeremon), Ravenna 1903 (on Theodectas and Moschion), and Webster 1954 and 1956 (the former on the value of Aristotle's *Poetics* for reconstructing the plots of fourth-century tragedies, the latter more generally on fourth-century Athenian art and literature) are, for all the questionable speculations included in them, rare examples of monographs or extensive studies dedicated to postclassical playwrights in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

⁴⁶ For a useful overview of the most important papyri pertaining to fourth-century tragedy see Xanthakis-Karamanos 1997.

untypical of the structure, style or even quality of most fourth-century tragedy. The *Alexandra* of Lycophron, a unique text in every way, is in essence an extended messenger speech, and too idiosyncratic to be considered representative of any norm.⁴⁷ We also cannot be certain whether the *Exagōgē* of Ezekiel, a third-century BC Jewish ‘epic’ drama⁴⁸ of which around 269 lines survive (*TrGF* 128), was an isolated phenomenon catering to the needs of a particular community, the Hellenised Jews of Egypt, or whether such was the kind of tragic drama generally written in that period. Finally, in a cruel twist of fate, the one example of a postclassical tragic play that survives intact and that would fit comfortably into any formal definition of Greek tragedy is at the same time the most misleading. The *Rhesus* was inserted into Euripides’ corpus probably by an error of attribution, displacing a genuinely Euripidean namesake.⁴⁹ Scholars, most importantly Liapis (2012), have pinpointed an astonishing number of faults undermining both the dramaturgy and the language of the play. There have also been more charitable readings,⁵⁰ and the discussion on the play’s merits will probably remain open. The crux of the matter is the following: even if the *Rhesus* is indeed to be regarded as a major disappointment, it is still ill-advised to use it as the basis for all-encompassing conclusions such as Kuch’s (1993: 548, 550) on the quality of postclassical tragic drama:

The tendency to bring suspense and distractions into tragic drama including the production of show effects [*sc.* as opposed to writing tragedies of serious political commitment] predominated as is apparent in *Rhesus*. [...] To judge by *Rhesus* fourth-century tragedy had obviously more the intention to entertain and to offer interest and excitement rather than to promote self-understanding according to the standards of fifth-century polis democracy.

⁴⁷ The very status of the *Alexandra* as a tragedy, even an experimental one, is contested. The text is omitted in the first comprehensive monograph on Hellenistic tragedy to appear for eighty years (Kotlińska-Toma 2015). On the play see now Hornblower 2015, and this volume.

⁴⁸ ‘Epic’ in the sense of comprising, apparently, not a unified *mythos* around a single *praxis*, but a long string of episodes stretching over an extended period of time.

⁴⁹ On this scenario see Liapis 2009.

⁵⁰ Burnett 1985; Fries 2014, and this volume.

Quite simply, one should *not* judge by the dubious standard of *Rhesus*.⁵¹ Condemning, as Kuch does, five centuries' worth of 'postclassical' tragic production on the shaky foundation of one arguably mediocre play would be the same as belittling the whole of fifth-century tragedy based on the shortcomings of, say, Euripides' *Andromache*. The faults of the *Rhesus*, such as they may be, must remain the faults of the *Rhesus*, not of the entire tragic production after the fifth century. After all, the *Alexandra* is a Hellenistic *tour de force*, and the *Exagōgē*, although often scorned for not complying with the Aristotelian doctrines on tragic structure, is not without its charms. At the very least, these two texts, untypical as they may be, attest to the undoubtedly positive fact that in the Hellenistic period 'tragedy' was a diverse phenomenon that could take a plethora of forms and guises.

Scholars started looking more closely at the postclassical tragic fragments from the 1970s onwards. Interest was bolstered by the gradual accretion of relevant papyri and the constant enrichment of the *TrGF*, but also by the appearance of ground-breaking scholarship on a number of issues pertaining to the subject. Sifakis (1967) was the first to highlight the diversity and ebullience of Hellenistic theatre life, which the dearth of texts often obscures. Webster (²1967) collected all archaeological data illustrating tragedy and satyr play. Pickard-Cambridge (1968, 2nd augmented edition 1988) offered the most thorough exposition of Greek theatre practice going much further than the fifth century. Mette (1977) made the epigraphic material concerning theatrical performances in Athens and beyond readily available to the theatre-oriented classicist (recently, Millis and Olson 2012 masterfully re-edited the two most important inscriptions relating to Athenian production). Finally, Ghiron-Bistagne (1976) systematised the information on actors mainly in the Hellenistic period. Her path-breaking work was continued by Stephanis (1988), an exhaustive prosopographical lexicon of all theatre practitioners of antiquity. Le Guen (2001) and Aneziri (2003) focused more closely on the Hellenistic actors' guilds, while Easterling and Hall (2002), and Hugoniot *et al.* (2004) contributed valuable collections of articles on the art of acting, most of which concern the postclassical period. Csapo (2010) is the most comprehensive study to-date of the ancient actor's

⁵¹ Cf. Liapis (2012: lxxii), commenting on Thum 2005, who contrary to Kuch 1993 denies that *Rhesus* is a fourth-century play, because it does not share the supposed general tendencies of that period.

art in relation to the shifting ideological discourses on theatre. More general works have laid the groundwork for the volume at hand and, one hopes, for future studies: these include Kannicht *et al.* (1991), a survey of Greek tragedy from the origins to Ezekiel; Green (1994) on the interaction between theatre and society from classical to Imperial times; Csapo and Slater (1995), a judicious selection of sources on classical and postclassical theatre in English translation; Wilson (2000) on the institution of *khoregia* and (2007) on Greek theatre festivals.⁵² Interest in postclassical theatre is mounting: in the last couple of years as many as four books on the topic have seen the light of day: Csapo *et al.* (2014) offers a wide-ranging overview of Greek theatre in the fourth century; Vakhtikari (2014) studies the proliferation of theatre performance outside Athens in the late fifth and fourth centuries (expanding the scope of Bosher 2012a); the authors in Lamari (2015) examine the pivotal phenomenon of tragic reperformances in Athens and beyond; and Kotlińska-Tomà (2015) contributes a useful exposition of Hellenistic tragedy (on this book, though, see Petrides 2015).⁵³ Most recently Wright (2016) published the first of two volumes on ‘the lost plays of Greek tragedy’. Significantly, Volume 1, which deals with every known fifth- and fourth-century name but the Big Three, labels these playwrights ‘neglected authors’ rather than *tragicci minores*. The paradigm is certainly shifting.

Nonetheless, excluding the *Alexandra*, the *Exagōgē* and of course the *Rhesus*, which have been studied at length in monographs and commentaries, scholarly output on postclassical tragedy still consists mostly of individual case studies and disquisitions on specific issues.⁵⁴ The aforesaid book by Xanthakis-Karamanos (1980) deserves credit as the first attempt to examine the material comprehensively and synthetically, but for the reasons stated above it should now be regarded as out of

⁵² See also Le Guen 2010 on money as a factor in Greek dramatic contexts.

⁵³ Cf. also Martina 2003. Roman tragedy seems to have modelled itself occasionally on postclassical Greek plays but more importantly to have utilised some of the techniques established by fourth- and third-century Greek tragic playwrights: see, e.g., Tarrant 1978 and Boyle 1997 on Seneca; and Erasmo 2004: 52-80 on the *fabula praetexta*, which may have been influenced by the re-appearance of historical drama in such Hellenistic playwrights as Moschion (possibly early 3rd century). Researches on Menander and postclassical comedy (e.g., Wiles 1991, Lape 2004, Petrides and Papaioannou 2010, and Petrides 2014), which focus on the interaction between performance semiotics and civic ideology in an era of alleged ‘apoliticism’, can also provide insights applicable to contemporary tragic drama.

⁵⁴ For example: Collard 1970, Stephanopoulos 1988, 1995-6, 1997, etc.

date.⁵⁵ Postclassical satyr play has been more fortunate: the ‘*poetae minores*’ of this genre (once again the term is used in reference to all satyr-play authors other than Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) have been competently commented upon by Cipolla (2003). Most volumes dealing with ‘tragedy after the fifth century’, such as Gildenhard and Revermann (2010), concern themselves with the reception of classical drama rather than with the continuing evolution of the genre after Euripides, or (as in the case of Csapo *et al.* 2014) with the broader socio-economic aspects of theatre primarily in the fourth century. Currently, there is no such thing as a *vue d’ensemble*, a comprehensive study discussing from a variety of viewpoints the most important aspects of this complex, variegated and often elusive phenomenon that is Greek tragic dramaturgy after the fifth century, avoiding the pitfalls described in the previous pages and applying the many advances of recent years in the theory and methodology of working with fragmentary literature, dramatic or other.⁵⁶ The volume at hand aspires to fill this bibliographic gap.

THE CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

The volume consists of three parts. Part One (‘Subtexts’), comprising the first five chapters of the book, analyses aspects of the socio-political, cultural, literary-historical and performative frameworks that set the stage for the development of Greek tragedy after the death of Euripides.

Chapter 1, ‘The fifth century and after: (dis)continuities in Greek tragedy’, by Francis Dunn, calls for a more nuanced understanding of fourth-century tragic drama, away from the tendency to over- or misinterpret the evidence at hand. Dunn cautions against the assumption that fourth-century tragedy was any less diverse than the tragedy of the preceding era and advises that any attempt to (re)construct universal trends runs the risk of being unfounded and reductive. The data at hand paint a much more complicated picture than commonly acknowledged: fourth-century tragedians adopt some of the innovations of the late fifth century, but also move in their own, different directions in other respects. Dunn explores this dual tendency first by focusing on aspects of song and plot, and then by discussing broader developments in

⁵⁵ For a review of Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980 see Stephanopoulos 1984.

⁵⁶ See for example Most 1997; Arnott 2000; Dover 2000; McHardy *et al.* 2005.

naturalism, theatrical self-reflexivity and what he calls 'ethical contingency', that is, the uncertainty of living in the present without reliance on the past or the future. Dunn also reassesses a number of sweeping generalisations about fourth-century tragedy, such as that it saw a decline in choral song; that it follows late Euripides in constructing exclusively melodramatic plots; or that it exhibits increased literary/theatrical self-consciousness compared to fifth-century tragedy. Breaking with the past is just as common in this period as continuing on established and proven trajectories.

Chapter 2, 'Society and politics in post-fifth century tragedy', by David Carter, further contributes to the understanding of the continuities that bind fifth- and fourth-century tragedy closely together. Carter's special focus is the political, intellectual and ethical emphases within the plays, which appear to have remained unaffected by the changing social and political conditions, for example by the loss of empire. Carter debunks the myth that tragedy in the fourth century was more rhetorical than political (*Po.* 1450b4-8), in the sense that the plot stopped having specifically Athenian resonances and developed a tendency towards mere rhetorical embellishment. He identifies clear connections between the fifth and the fourth centuries in matters relating to the values and the discourses of the democratic polis; such connections are strong enough to suggest that at least in terms of its political concerns, as well as in its use of rhetoric as a structural device rather than as an end in itself, Greek tragedy after the fifth century was quite similar to the tragedy of Sophocles and Euripides.

Chapter 3 ('Theatre performance after the fifth century'), co-authored by Anne Duncan and Vayos Liapis, begins by looking into the process of canonising fifth-century tragedy, especially the works of the three great tragedians. Among other things, it explores the theatrical environment, equipment and performance mode of postclassical tragedy, expounding on the main innovations in terms of the performance medium and focusing especially on what was undoubtedly the most spectacular device of postclassical drama, the actor itself. The chapter concludes by setting the record straight regarding the vexed issue of the chorus in postclassical tragedy, by insisting once again that the evidence does not support the traditional straightforward narrative of decline, but makes for a much more variegated picture.

Chapter 4, 'Beyond Athens: The dissemination of Greek tragedy from the fourth century onwards', by Brigitte Le Guen, reviews all the documentary evidence

(literary, inscriptional, archaeological) attesting to the diffusion of tragedy after the fifth century, first to the Western Mediterranean and Macedonia, and then, through the conquests of Alexander the Great, to the four corners of the Greek-speaking world. Le Guen shows that this phenomenon, together with the diversification of the venues and occasions of performance, had obvious repercussions on the meaning and function of tragedy in the Hellenistic era. Still, she warns that it would be a misconception to believe that the diffusion of tragedy either severed the ties of theatre with its patron god, Dionysus, or that it signified the end of the symbiosis between polis (not necessarily the Athenian polis) and tragedy.

One of the common misconceptions concerning tragedy after the fifth century is that the amount of sung and danced scenes included in the plays was significantly reduced. It is Mark Griffith's first goal in Chapter 5 ('Music and dance in the Greek tragic theatre after the fifth century') to show that, despite the possible reduction in the chorus' active involvement in the action (a reduction better evidenced in comedy rather than in tragedy), and even if the practice of inserting *passe-partout* choral parts (*embolima*) whose librettos had nothing to do with the action was indeed widespread, tragic drama remained a highly musical event. The second major question Griffith addresses is whether the postclassical period saw significant changes in the actual music played, that is, in the melodies, tunings and musical styles. Evidence from the musically notated papyri and other sources suggests that the wider changes in the music of the period carried over into the performances of tragedy. Not least because Athens had no distinctive musical tradition of its own, Griffith notes, theatre music had always been, and continued to be, a melting pot of different music styles from around the Greek (or even Asian) world as well as a ready receptacle of innovation and change.

Part Two ('Texts') comprises four chapters, which focus on the textual evidence for postclassical Greek tragedy, and provide analysis, discussion, and doxography on key texts or fragments of texts.

Chapter 6, 'Fourth-century tragedy: The lost plays', by Vayos Liapis and Theodoros Stephanopoulos, provides an exhaustive survey of all major fragments of fourth-century tragedy. While it naturally focuses on the most celebrated playwrights of the era (Astydamas, Carcinus Junior, Chaeremon and Theodectas), it does not exclude other, less distinguished figures (Diogenes, Dicaeogenes, Antiphon,

Patrocles, Dionysius of Syracuse, Diogenes of Sinope, Sosiphanes of Syracuse). The chapter scrutinises the material at our disposal with a fundamental call for caution: what survives from the tragic production of this period does evince a theatrical culture that is still flourishing and vibrant, spreading all over the Greek world; the fourth-century playwrights do attempt bold experiments with all the essential components of tragedy, such as myth, music, stagecraft, acting, etc., often in rivalry with the fifth-century dramatists; however, the remains are too scattered and heterogeneous to justify the sweeping conclusions and schematic inferences of earlier scholars. In fact, we cannot even be certain whether ‘fourth-century tragedy’ constitutes an actual generic turn or simply a convenient periodization tag — possibly even a misleading one.

The tragedy of *Rhesus* is the subject of Chapter 7 by Almut Fries. Fries re-examines the fundamental questions affecting the play’s interpretation and takes issue with critics that condemn it as lacking deeper significance. She begins with the play’s scene and setting, cast of characters, distribution of roles and relationship with its most immediate sources (*Iliad* 10, the Epic Cycle, and, as regards the character of Rhesus in particular, stories preserved in the Homeric scholia and perhaps in local Thracian lore). The play’s structure and meaning is scrutinised in an extended section, which attempts to make a case for a play of much better quality than otherwise believed. The ‘eclectic’ dramaturgy and stagecraft of the *Rhesus*, with its unique mixture of archaising and unprecedented elements, is also afforded much attention, whereas the play’s language and style are connected with the issue of its authenticity and date. The chapter concludes with an overview of *Rhesus*’ reception in antiquity.

Hellenistic tragedy is the focus of Simon Hornblower’s Chapter 8, entitled ‘Hellenistic tragedy and satyr drama; Lycophron’s *Alexandra*’. The abundant inscriptional record preserves over sixty names of tragedians from this period, all of whom were highly prolific. Several thousand tragic plays were written in the centuries after Alexander’s death, and tragedy permeated intellectual and public life on an unprecedented scale. That these texts did not pass the test of time was not necessarily due to their lack of quality or popularity. The general image of Hellenistic tragedy, as gleaned from indirect sources and the few fragments that survive, is of a genre which continued mainly to dramatize traditional mythological episodes, but did not shy away from historical subjects (contemporary or older) and even political themes. Hellenistic tragedies probably also displayed a greater proneness to melodrama and

other excesses of violence, spectacle and pathos compared to the fifth and fourth centuries, whereas in terms of poetic style they are set apart by their metrical conservativeness. Hornblower's chapter eventually concentrates on the *Alexandra*, and discusses the possibility of extensive interpolation (which is discarded) and questions of content, genre, authorship, date and politics. Hornblower's central thesis is that the Lycophron credited with *Alexandra* is not Lycophron of Chalcis, the poet of the Pleiad, but a namesake (or grandson or pseudonymous author) writing in the time of Flamininus and in the aftermath of the battle at Cynoscephalae, a whole century later. The second-century dating is also consistent with what Hornblower understands to be the play's political thesis: *Alexandra*, he suggests, goes against much Greek and foreign feeling in celebrating Roman military and political ascendancy. Hornblower's chapter concludes with a brief overview of what remains of Hellenistic satyr drama with special emphasis on Lycophron of Chalcis, Sositheus, and Python's *Agēn*.

Chapter 9, 'Biblical Tragedy: The *Exagōgē* of Ezekiel', by Pierluigi Lanfranchi, looks at the seventeen extant fragments of Ezekiel's *Exagōgē*, the most substantial piece of Hellenistic tragic drama at our disposal barring the *Alexandra*. The identity of the author, the date of the play, the place and the occasion on which it was produced are hotly debated issues; however, the vibrant community of Hellenized Jews living in Alexandria provides the likeliest context for a tragedy actively attempting to recast the Jewish tradition in the language and conceptual frameworks of the Greeks. The *Exagōgē* tells the story of Moses and the great exodus of the Jews from Egypt. It dramatizes the first fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus, although in certain cases material is drawn from different sources. The most impressive surviving fragment is a messenger speech recounting the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The vexed issue whether the *Exagōgē* even deserves to be labelled a 'tragedy' highlights the narrow limits of definition and prescription in this new, wide and diverse cultural environment. For sure, if Aristotle is any measure, the play violates some of the fundamental conventions of Greek tragedy (primarily the tendency to uphold the unities of time and place) and lacks some of Aristotelian tragedy's principal constitutive elements (for instance, *hamartia* and *peripeteia*). Nevertheless, in many of its other aspects, primarily in metrical form and dramatic structure, the *Exagōgē* conforms to the norms of the tragic genre and is heavily influenced by fifth-century tragedy (the aforementioned messenger speech in particular bears a palpable

relation to those of Aeschylus' *Persians* and of Euripides). Ancient audiences, Lanfranchi concludes, would have no trouble categorising the *Exagōgē* as a tragic play.

The third and final part of the volume, entitled 'Contexts', raises more general questions, exploring the tragic dramas' *Nachleben* in the Imperial period. It concludes with a view of tragedy at large from the postclassical scholar's standpoint.

In Chapter 10, 'Attitudes towards tragedy from the Second Sophistic to Late Antiquity', Ruth Webb focuses on the multifarious attitudes towards tragedy in the first centuries AD, which emanated from the double survival of the genre as both a living performance art and an authoritative text. Tragedy survived the spread of Christianity, despite the opposition of the Church: a range of different forms of the genre (new and old plays, sung extracts, performances with chorus or without a chorus, etc.) were still performed in a variety of venues until the sixth century AD. Beyond the stage, tragedy in this period could be consumed in three further ways: in schools, as an instrument of linguistic, rhetorical and moral instruction; at home, in silent, private perusal; and in social events, in the form of dramatized readings. Tragic plays were now studied extensively, not always as unified wholes but also in order to be mined for examples of Attic usage, as sources of maxims useful for moral edification and rhetorical exploitation, and as compendia of information on questions of mythology, topography, etc. Rhetoricians employed tragic plots — especially Euripidean ones, on account of their being more 'plausible' — as raw material for exercises in argumentation, *ēthopoia* (rhetorical presentation of character), etc. Readers of tragedies in this period never lose sight of the fact that the scripts are but the bare bones of a multisensory phenomenon. The scholia and other written sources on tragedy show readers fully active in imaginative reconstructions of the original performances, aided of course by their familiarity with a continued performance tradition. However, the old Aristotelian idea that the spectacle as imagined in the act of reading is complete, hence one can dispense with the performance and the performer, had now taken root.

Finally, if one seeks to reconstruct the fragmented image of tragedy after the fifth century, one cannot afford to disregard the significant tradition of scholarship *on* tragedy, which thrived alongside the production of old and new tragic dramas. In Chapter 11, 'Scholars and scholarship on tragedy', the last in the volume, Johanna

Hanink speaks of the importance of this tradition, and contributes a succinct overview of its evolution and general trends, from its tentative beginnings in classical Athens to its peak in Alexandria, Pergamum and Rome. As regards the beginnings of tragic scholarship Hanink underscores the archival diligence of the Athenian state, and the catalytic influence of Lycurgus and his 'official edition' of the three canonical tragedians on the transmission of tragedy to the later generations. The birth of scholarship as we know it occurred thanks to the researches of Aristotle and his school, whose activities ranged from yet deeper archival research to literary history, theory and criticism. The great scholars working under the patronage of the Ptolemies in the Mouseion of Alexandria achieved the next great leap in the history of tragic scholarship. They were especially preoccupied with issues of authenticity, and produced 'corrections' (*diorthōseis*) of texts (practically, critical editions) with a good mind for locating spurious attributions of titles, lines and passages. Alexandrian scholars usually accompanied their editions with extensive commentaries (*hypomnēmata*) and various treatises providing all sorts of elucidation on the texts. Hanink concludes her chapter with an examination of tragic scholia and the 'Lives' (biographies) of the tragic poets. Although their reliability may vary, modern scholars can still profit immensely from ancient scholia not only as a source of *realia*, variant readings, or other practical information, but also as a monument of shifting scholarly perceptions regarding major issues of theatre interpretation, such as poetic style, dramaturgy and performance practice.