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# Introduction

INVESTIGATORS OF TRAGEDY'S early days have for quite some time been stuck in an impasse, recycling constantly and inconclusively the same few bits of ancient information. Comedy seems, if anything, in a worse condition, so far as accounts of its emergence are concerned: with less anecdotal evidence, and with scripts later by half a century, its early days and development are even more of a mystery and equally the object—or victim—of far-fetched speculation about ritual, myth, and the seasons. The average skeptic (and I count myself one) would rightly doubt that anything new, much less true, could be said about such subjects. Nevertheless, the present book does try to offer an original approach to the old question of where tragic choruses came from—or, as I would prefer to put it, what they were doing in the life of the city. Part of the novelty of this approach lies in considering Athenian drama in the social context of its original performance at the festivals of Dionysos (the rural Dionysia, the Lenaia, and the City Dionysia) and in noticing the untranslatable cultural differences between the Athenian theater and ours.<sup>1</sup>

The following chapters suggest that, in a large sense, Athenian dramatic festivals were the occasion for elaborate symbolic play on themes of proper and improper civic behavior on the part of men, predicated on the assumption

1. [This aspect of Winkler's work anticipates some of the excellent studies in recent years on the cultural production of tragedy in the Greek world. In particular, D. Carter 2011b includes a number of essays dealing with the finances and social organization of the Athenian tragic festivals and their relation to fifth-century Athenian government and society. See especially Wilson 2011 and D. Carter 2011a. Wilson 2007a provides numerous essays on what Greek documentary sources (especially inscriptions) tell us about dramatic festivals in Athens and elsewhere. Wilson 2000 offers a comprehensive account of the Athenian institution of the *khoregia* (private financial sponsorship of the costs of training and preparing a chorus for performance at a dramatic festival), especially as a vehicle for aristocratic competition within the democratic *polis*. Marx 2012 emphasizes the untranslatable cultural differences between Greek tragedy and modern tragedy and argues for the radical alterity of Greek drama, in ways often aligned with Winkler's general approach.]

that the principal component of proper male citizenship was military. At those festivals, just as at private symposia, such play with embodied definitions of good and bad masculinity occurred in both serious and facetious formats: tragedy and comedy alike were built on contrasts of behavior (and physique) represented in terms of the taut and the slack. A central reference point for these representations—the notional targets of their lessons (*paideia*) about the trials of manhood (*andreia*)—were the young men of the city.<sup>2</sup> These young men were also the choral performers of tragedy at least, and perhaps of comedy as well.

It is therefore with the young men of the Athenian *polis*, or city-state, that this study begins. It looks in particular at the figure of the *ephebe*, defined in terms of status (rather than in terms of birthdays or formal institutions) as a young, propertied, Athenian citizen male on the border between boyhood and manhood who is training to prepare himself for warfare as a *hoplite*, or heavy-armed foot-soldier in an infantry phalanx. It puts the *ephebe* into the larger web of social meanings and practices concerning *andragathiē*, or manly excellence, in Mediterranean societies. It then reaches out to touch on such subjects as tragedy, comedy, costume, military dancing, quasi-dramatic performances at private symposia, courtroom trials, melodrama, and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

If I may be allowed just one small attempt to elicit the skeptical reader's benevolence: I hereby acknowledge that each of the pieces of evidence I am about to assemble could, taken one by one, be construed in ways other than I have construed it here. Some of them are late, some are incomplete, most are relatively small and either ambiguous or inconclusive. Most have to do with performance and social context rather than with the dramas themselves. Indeed, it is because of these very features of the evidence, and especially because of our fetishizing of the "dramas themselves" and the Text, that no one has noticed the coherence that I am about to trace.

To arrive at the fuller cultural understanding of Athenian drama on offer here requires as thick a description as possible, and (to speak frankly) the overall persuasiveness of the present argument rests not on any one irresistible fact but on the ensemble of many details. My ideal reader, therefore, will be of two minds. On one level, they will check the weight and accuracy of each fact or interpretation to see how far it contributes to a reasonable and believable picture of what was once a living practice. On that level, the final judgment may have to be "Not Proven." But on another level, I expect the serious reader not to be content with a merely skeptical attitude to all this suggestive material but to take responsibility for explaining what the aggregate of the evidence assembled

2. See Rosen and Sluiter 2003 for a collection of essays exploring how the concept of *andreia* functioned in Greek and Roman society. Bassi 2003 is particularly helpful for the diachronic analysis of the term, as it developed from a concept of military valor to a democratic ideal in other spheres of social life.

here does mean. To make these readerly activities possible, I have laid out some of the significant evidence about Athenian fighting, dance training, and citizenship—topics usually slighted in accounts of Athenian drama.<sup>3</sup>

The subject treated here would traditionally be labeled “the origin of Greek tragedy.” But the word “origin” seems to me to claim much too much, suggesting as it does something primal—whether seminal or oval—before which there was nothing. Founding events do, of course, occur; the more usual social operation, however, is not to create but to adapt whatever is at hand. In hopes of avoiding the typical mystification that often attends discussions of origins, I would prefer to say that the hypothesis advanced here is about the early character of Attic tragedy (and comedy) rather than their absolute Beginning.

From the early days of tragedy to its later and more fully represented period, the character of its scripts changed in marked ways. That is an aesthetic history, which has been told many times on its own terms. But such a history, if it is to avoid being a Rorschach fantasy of the modern interpreter, needs to be founded on a concrete knowledge of dramatic performance—particularly on the shared and usually unspoken presuppositions of the composers, performers, and audience. This book, therefore, does not aim at a general interpretation of tragedy *based on* the surviving scripts. Rather, it tries to reconstruct from the facts of festival performance the framework of understanding that the audience originally brought to its viewing of the plays.

In other words, this study advances a hypothesis about performance and its social meanings, not primarily a hypothesis about the scripts that we call tragedies. The relation of those thirty-two extant scripts to the social and physical performance as I describe it is rather like that of a clay sculpture to the wire frame on which it is built up. The visible surface of the sculpture conceals the enabling framework at its core, and X-raying the core (the speculative enterprise undertaken here) may not be essential to some kinds of aesthetic appreciation of the surface. But what I am trying to do with Attic drama could not be accurately characterized as aesthetic appreciation. My goal is rather to explore, to reconstruct if you will, *the social meanings of the material and physical components* of its original production.

To change the artistic metaphor, you might say that I am concerned not with the individual paintings in a museum but with the question of how they were originally framed and hung and lit, and who was admitted to view them; only after I have advanced some answers to that question will I go on to ask,

3. [Of these three topics, the last has received considerable attention in the past three decades, though often focusing (as Winkler does not) on the texts of the tragedies themselves as evidence for citizenship and democratic discourse. See, among other works, D. Carter 2011b, 2008, Wilson 2007a, Meier 1993, and numerous articles on individual authors and specific plays. Of particular interest (and influenced by Winkler) are the essays by Pozzi, Mitchell-Boyask, Segal, Goff, Katz, Tyrrell, and Zweig in Padilla 1999.]

quite tentatively: by what criteria were some awarded prizes? In the case of tragedy, those criteria of original appreciation, I shall try to maintain, have much more to do with Attic *andragathiē*, the poetics of manhood, and the ethics of citizen-soldiery than they do with such abstract philosophical issues as fate and freedom. The world of values, choices, and social possibilities inhabited by Medeia, Xerxes, Deianeira, and Orestes is a world centered on the primary social role assigned to aristocratic soldiers, on whose *andragathiē* the survival and welfare of all people depend and in terms of which the reciprocal duties of all classes are defined or, in some cases, challenged. What we may learn from such a study is, as it were, how to light and hang the tragic pictures so that we are likely to be viewing them from the proper angle and thus can better estimate what the original audience was intended to notice.

The suggestion that the performance of tragedy had a military aspect, related (perhaps distantly) to the physical and moral training of young men, is based on the coincidence of three facts: the rectangular formation of tragic choruses, the identity of the choristers as young men, and the account given in chapter 42 of Aristotle's *Constitution of the Athenians*, which describes the institutionalized ephebate of the later fourth century BCE. Enrolled when they had reached their eighteenth birthday, the ephebes spent two years in training—the first year learning the use of weapons while stationed in Peiraeus (the port of Athens), the second on guard duty at the border forts of Attika. At the beginning of their second year, an assembly of all citizens was held and the ephebes displayed their ability to march and maneuver in close formation as a hoplite phalanx. Now the interesting fact about this performance, which was a kind of first-year graduation ceremony at which the young warriors received from the state a shield and a spear, is that it took place not on some marching field or parade ground outside the city but in the theater of Dionysos—in the same orchestral area where select groups of ephebes (if I may so call them) danced as the tragic chorus, in rectangular formation, performing what I would describe as an aesthetically elevated version of close-order drill.

Together these three facts suggest that there was an analogy between the movement and personnel of the tragic choruses and the movement and personnel of the ephebate on parade. The very persons (or rather a representative selection of them) who marched in rectangular rank and file in the orchestra as second-year cadets, performing for the assembled citizenry, also marched and danced in rectangular formation at the City Dionysia, though on that occasion they did so wearing masks and costumes.

Supporting this perception, but in the second rank, is the audience's character as a civic assembly—not a fortuitous gathering of "theatergoers" but a quasi-official gathering of (male) citizens, who were seated in tribal order, one tribe per wedge of tiered seats.<sup>4</sup> (This was evidently the seating arrangement

4. On the question of the presence of citizen women in the audience, see chapter 2, n. 75.

used for the *Ekklēsia*, the Athenian Popular Assembly, when it met for official business on the Pnyx.) The more prominent citizens sat toward the front, with a special section reserved for the members of the *Boulē*, the Council. The layout of the auditorium thus displayed the organization of the body politic in terms both of tribal equality and of social hierarchy. Further, the entire festival had a civic-military aura, suggesting that *polis* and *tragōidia* in Athens were not so distant from each other as the modern understandings of “politics” and “tragedy” would imply.<sup>5</sup>

Readers of this book will find the evidence for the military meanings of Athenian tragic performance and for the audience’s identity as a civic collective laid out, respectively, in chapters 1 and 2. Following them, in chapter 3, is a hypothesis about how the ethics of citizen-soldiery and the social drama of masculine risk-taking might be related to the plots of tragedy. In the final chapter, chapter 4, I try to show that some oddities in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, long neglected if not repressed by modern readers, make sense when they are viewed in the light of the evidence presented in the previous chapters. The result, I hope, will be both a consistent and a plausible interpretation of Athenian drama as a social practice preoccupied specifically with rehearsals of manhood.

5. [Winkler’s observations here have gained indirect support from evidence for theatrical practices elsewhere in ancient Greece. Chaniotis 2007 points out that theaters in Macedonia, Kaunos, and Samos had markings for seating by tribe. See below, chapter 2, n. 76.]

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