

## From Tragic Narratives towards New Narratives of Tragedy

**Criticism by negatives.** In ancient as well as modern times, Aeschylus' tragedies—especially the ones preceding the *Oresteia*—have often been described as uneventful, actionless, plotless, and in many ways nondramatic. These descriptions exemplify the habit of appraising Aeschylean drama based on what it is or does *not* (not yet, not quite, or not enough). The focus lies on perceived shortcomings of the plays more than on their intrinsic and distinctive traits. However widespread, this line of criticism raises considerable problems. Implicit and explicit comparisons with Sophocles and Euripides pave the way for evaluating Aeschylus by dramatic standards or desiderata which crystallized as such after him. This is a retroactive, somewhat circular procedure that is prone to accordingly biased results. For example, the plots of Aeschylus will strike us as being awkwardly constructed as long as we assess them based on their otherness—e.g., their distance from the plots concocted by Euripides, the ones praised by Aristotle, or other “model plots” whose existence in the theatre culture of Aeschylus cannot be presumed. Similar arguments can apply to other important aspects of the plays such as action, pace, and consistency. Approaches of this circular sort have produced pictures of Aeschylus which, notwithstanding their respective merits, still approximate or marginalize those traits that are flamboyant in Aeschylus and less pronounced in later drama.

To counteract this tendency, the present study reconsiders a set of features that are, at the same time, conspicuous in Aeschylus, puzzling for his readers, and still awaiting examination on their own premises. First and foremost among these features is the prominence of embedded narratives about off-stage events, on the one hand, and the rich responses (e.g., laments, comments) which such narratives elicit from the internal narratees, on the other hand; by comparison, later tragedies tend to be more focused on stage events and on how these elicit further events. No less peculiarly, Aeschylean dramaturgy relies on multiple re-narrations of the same events, meaning that different internal narrators retell, say, the same battle or piece of myth from their own unique perspectives and in their individual fashions. In these cases, it is the interplay of same-but-different narratives—the ways in which they complement, detail, counterpoint, or rewrite each other—which creates key dramaturgic ingredients such as momentum, dramatic arches, and suspense (*Wie-Spannung*). Fur-

thermore, Aeschylus typically constructs the interactions between his characters as exchanges between internal narrators and internal narratees, thereby keeping both these parties highly committed to interacting with each other. On the one hand, the narrators show a remarkable capacity to stun, destabilize, and move the narratees into their complex responses; on the other hand, the proactive narratees compel the narrators to narrate better, further, or more fully by means of questions, encouragements, threats, or, more subtly but no less effectively, by professing incomprehension and disbelief. These and similar phenomena illustrate that what is most conspicuous about the dramaturgy of Aeschylus is a distinctive kind of narrativity—his way of dramatizing the narratives.

**Tragedy's different narrativities.** Compared to the tragic narratives of the second half of the fifth century BCE, the Aeschylean ones stand out for their sheer quantity, variety in form and performance, and dramaturgic relevance, to mention three aspects only. Line-wise, narratives such as messenger speeches, prophecies, dream telling, and telesthetic or teichoscopy-like reports together make up the bulk of Aeschylus' plays. As for variety, the narratives materialize in monologues and recitatives no less than in the sounds and shapes of choral performances, dialogues between the chorus and an actor as well as combinations of these two types (as in kommatic and lyric-epirrhematic narratives). Regarding the third aspect, narratives work as the motor that sets—and keeps—Aeschylus' drama in motion in that they constantly elicit responses and reactions from the internal narratees. Narrativity, thus, emerges as a cluster of narrative-related features which were constitutive of the tragedy of Aeschylus and probably (under his influence or because of mutual inspirations) other Attic playwrights in the 470s and 460s BCE. To judge from the surviving plays, this kind of narrativity started being transformed around the 450s BCE by tragedians including Sophocles and, by the end of his long career, even Aeschylus himself: in the *Oresteia* trilogy (458 BCE), narratives are less central than they used to be and less prominently in charge of the dramaturgy. On the other hand, if *Prometheus* was an imitation of Aeschylus fabricated at some point in the second half of the century (perhaps the 440s or 430s, as it has been argued), then this play would be a most eloquent document of what theatre-makers and audiences who had first-hand experience of Aeschylean performances and early reperformances regarded as typical of his tragedy, namely narratives over narratives. Designed to make dramatic action almost impossible, *Prometheus* puts narratives on display and gives them dramatic rights of their own. It stars a talkative protagonist suitably gifted with prophecy, forces him with fetters into immobility throughout the play, and leaves him there apparently for the

sole purpose of telling his extraordinary stories on the eager narratees' demand. In the scenario of a spurious *Prometheus*, thus, the spectators sensed the vintage touch of this marked narrativity because the tragic trends of their day had meanwhile outdated it; and a skilled imitator wagered his credibility not on the choral songs which modern scholars expect from Aeschylus and acutely miss in this play, but on extensive, compelling narratives about the past and the future.

At a bird's eye view, the surviving plays of Sophocles indicate that soon after Aeschylus the scope of narrative in drama was narrowing down considerably, while most of Euripides and, in a different but important way, Aristotle's *Poetics* confirm that this trend was very successful. Tragedy's trajectory of development steered from conspicuous narrativity towards greater reliance on action, from reports on offstage unavoids towards stage dynamics in the here and now, from delving in the narrators' perspectives towards being more plot-driven, and from the spirals of atmospheric re-narrations towards more linear, progressional, causal logics. The side-effects of these successful stage trends were post-classical notions of genre that, unlike the earlier ones, hypostatized narrative and drama as virtual opposites, and generic taxonomies that charted these two poles much more accurately than the prolific area in-between. Unpardonably roughly speaking, from the 450s BCE until the 1970s most readers of Aeschylus have found themselves at an awkward juncture, namely at the receiving end of a growing tradition that idealized features with which Aeschylus was fairly unconcerned as the almost universal desiderata of drama. Therefore, it is in discourses about genres that correctives can be found.

**Adapting the lenses to the eye.** Our understanding of ancient poetic genres has been steadily improving since the work of Bruno Gentili, Claude Calame, Oliver Taplin, and other pioneers of the cultural-and-performative turn in classical studies. A game changer was the realisation that, in the archaic and classical periods, what defined individual genres in themselves (or, to put it differently, what distinguished them from each other) were not so much literary forms as the contexts and modalities of the performance: that is, the occasions, venues, and communities in which the appropriate musicopoetic works were sung, embodied, and played in appropriate manners.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, thus, the investigation of performance-related dimensions is key to understanding poetic genres as living traditions which organized the expanse of *mousikē* into semiotic, aesthetic,

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1 If anything, it was rather such performance factors that produced literary consequences, as for example in the case of formularity, which was the creature of rhapsodic performance and eventually developed into a simulacrum of epic literature.

and affective domains—as for example when distinctive soundscapes and kinetic repertoires expressed the sorrows, hopes, or commitments of a community. At the same time, however, readers also need literary lenses to consider the textual remains of these musicopoetic performances, because the latter are lost and too scarcely documented for most scholarly (rather than artistic) purposes.

There are cogent reasons for complementing literary and performance angles with each other, such as the historical circumstances that performance informed its own literary manifestations *and* re-performance transformed them, as in the case of the actors' interpolations, for instance.<sup>2</sup> More extrinsically but no less relevantly, what the readers see in the texts—including what they connect with, relish, and *study*—is also the product of their situatedness, since we inevitably approach the texts through inherited literary frameworks (even departures from the frameworks need and navigate the frameworks themselves, as the present study may exemplify). Yet while the readers cannot escape their situatedness, they can counteract the biased perspectives and perceptions with lenses which are specifically designed to observe specific texts from specific standpoints.

Such adjustments are helpful in dealing with genres which underwent radical transformations during their long histories. Unlike, say, paeans and dithyrambs, tragedies never ceased to be written and read; and although this tradition was deeply transformative, its continuity inspires a false sense of familiarity. The set of expectations with which the readers approach tragedies of the past may be tailored on models that are different in virtually every regard except the genre's label. This hermeneutic fallacy essentially affects tragedies (and other poems) of the classical period in general, which originally qualified as such in virtue of their tragic sounds, visuals, and contexts but which the readers can only access through literary parameters. An additional quirk of the reception concerns the tragedy of Aeschylus in particular, because towards the end of his career tragedy started favouring a choice of structural and plot-related features which are clearly detectable in the medium of text—that is, more clearly than the performance-related innovations—and which soon came to define tragedy, both as such and as a literary genre.

**Reading as.** These literary-historical circumstances were determinant for the criticism by negatives which has been considered above. They situated macroscopic features of Aeschylean tragedy outside or at the periphery of the readers' horizon of expectations concerning drama and influenced the reception

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2 See, e.g., the studies collected in Budelmann / Phillips 2018 a.

accordingly. Yet, if genres and the related expectations have power over interpretation, can they also be used to make better sense of texts that elude us? And more specifically, what can be gained and lost from reading Aeschylus' works *as though* they were narrative pieces? However ahistorical and etic, this reading helps us focus less on the difformities of Aeschylean works from post-Aeschylean standards and more on the characteristics with which these tragedies were awarded first prizes at the City Dionysia, invitations to the artistic hotspot of Syracuse, and the exceptional piece of legislation which in 455 BCE encouraged remakes with public money, for instance. In this sense, the ahistorical reading appears to pursue historical agendas in its own way, inasmuch as it puts us in a better position to understand why Aeschylus' works epitomized tragic excellence in their own context. Ultimately, if the goal were an emic understanding of Aeschylus' works, then the major problem would not be reading them differently but reading them in the first instance—without any genuine understanding of the *Gesamtkunstwerke* for which the texts were written. In the absence of extensive first-or-so-hand information about the original performances, the best readers can hope for is an etic understanding that improves the balance between historicity and hermeneutics.

In this spirit, my book attempts a radical reappraisal of narrative as a vital force in drama, followed by a close observation of how this force works in Aeschylus. On the one hand, it rethinks the Aeschylean poems as the literary remains of a performance art (tentatively labelled “narrative drama”) that hybridized rich musicopoetic traditions of storytelling with each other *and* with theatrical impersonation. On the other hand, the book takes into account the readers' inherited understanding of drama as a genre that is quite the opposite of narrative and ideally narrative-free, and resolves to bring the mountain to Mohammed by repositioning Aeschylus on the genre map of his readers. These intertwined lines of investigation produce a composite set of questions: Which instruments are suitable for the literary analysis of tragic texts that can be neither dissected with the poetological toolkit of Aristotle nor conformed to the templates of drama erected by the Aristotelizing tradition? And in turn, what differences does such an analysis reveal between the use of tragic narratives in the 470s–460s BCE and in subsequent decades—which also means, how exactly does Aeschylus integrate storytelling and dramaturgy?

These issues roughly correspond to the two parts in which the volume is organized. Part One develops theoretical frameworks that promote the identification and analysis of manifold entanglements between narrative and drama. This begins with a new emphasis on the narrative-related features of Aeschylus' tragedies and with what motivates an enrichment of the genre perspectives on these texts (Chapter One). In turn, a transhistorical choice of

insights, ranging from the Homeric Hymns to transgeneric narratology but more narrowly focused on the classical period, shows how the initially fluid boundaries between narrative and drama stiffened as these evolved into literary forms more than embodied practices, with far-ranging consequences for drama theory (Chapter Two). Part Two relies on these frameworks to consider how narrativity shapes the earliest surviving tragedies and, possibly, one convincing imitation of their style. Since analyses need data, the texts are segmented according to the three main categories of narrative, response, and action in order to make diffuse phenomena better discernible through the plays (Chapter Three). This paves the way for a number of close readings that look into what and how, actually, narratives contribute to the structure, plot, characterization, and overall dramaturgy of individual plays (Chapter Four).

The rationale of this work is to produce an unapologetic re-evaluation of narrative as the protean matter of Aeschylus' drama. The incidence, sophistication, and dramaturgical import of narrative phenomena indicate that these are not by-products but the artfully constructed trademarks of Aeschylus' dramaturgy. The reticence to examine this type of dramaturgy in depth costs classicists an opportunity to reconsider the premises on which their own approaches to Greek tragedy rely, as well as an opportunity to make theoretical and historical contributions to studies on theatre, genres, and narratology, for example. In the absence of a time machine which lets us experience Aeschylean performance or reverts our situatedness within the *literary* tradition of tragedy, we can experiment with heuristic means to bring our own and Aeschylus' notions of drama somewhat closer to each other. On the one hand, the ancient wisdom regarding the intersections of narrative and drama helps us historicize their hybridity, and on the other hand, reimagining Aeschylean theatre as an art of telling-and-enacting stories enhances our understanding of the narrative and choral phenomena that were constitutive of it. If these measures equipped us to address the narrative elephant in Aeschylus' room, we might recognize in it a stunning offspring of arts that still love each other.