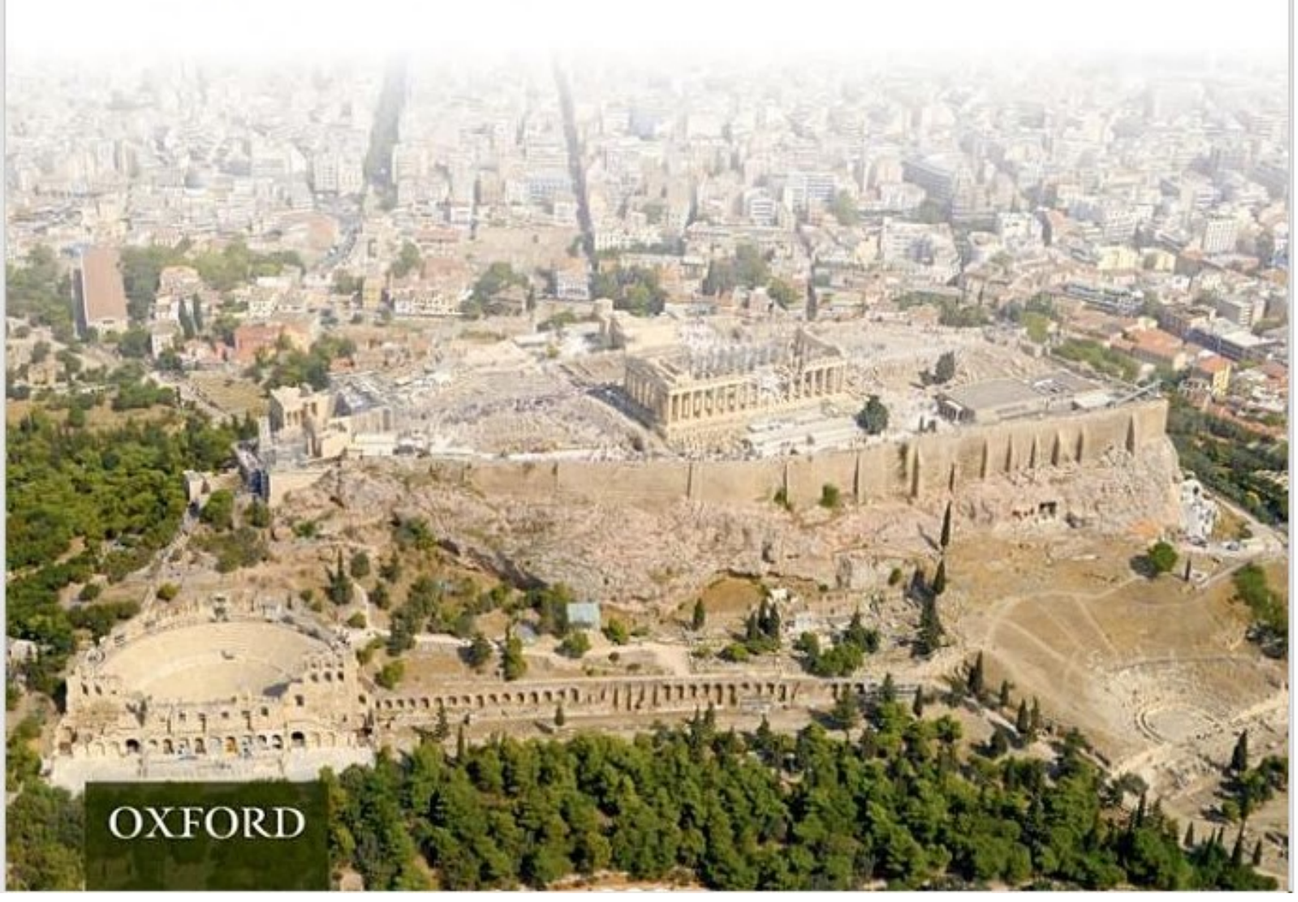
Edited by D. M. CARTER

WHY ATHENS?

A Reappraisal of Tragic Politics



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PMG	D. Page (ed.) (1962), *Poetae Melici Graecae*. Oxford
P.Oxy.	(1898–), *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*
SEG	(1923–), *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. Leiden
S–M	B. Snell and H. Maechler (eds) (1987, 1989), *Pindari Carmina cum Fragmentis* , 2 vols. Leipzig
Tod	M. N. Tod (1946–8), *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, 2 vols. Oxford
TrGF	B. Snell and R. Kannicht (eds) (1971–2004), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Göttingen
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Introduction

Mark Griffith and D. M. Carter

1. TWELVE PRINCIPLES FOR READING GREEK TRAGEDY (GRIFFITH)

In this brief and informal chapter, I outline twelve basic principles (*archai, axiōmata*) for discussing the interpretation of Greek tragedy.[1] I think that laying these principles out clearly and explicitly as a prelude to this volume might help reduce the likelihood of readers misunderstanding the overall purpose of my own chapter, and may also perhaps help clear the deck usefully for some of the other contributions to this volume. In my opinion, none of these twelve principles—all of which I have framed as paradoxes, that is, as statements of two broadly contradictory critical positions, both of which I consider to be largely true (hence BOTH . . . AND . . .)—should be controversial. Several of them, indeed, may well strike many readers as being banal and too obvious to need stating. Yet it has become clear over the last decade or so that a number of scholars and critics (some of them surprisingly influential) prefer to complain seriously, even stridently, about several of these particular positions and to challenge their validity and appropriateness; and of course such interventions provoke further responses, without any observable progress being made. It is also clear that a number of critics of Greek tragedy (again, some of them quite influential) have not paused to think through some of these paradoxically paired principles, but have fallen into the habit instead of proceeding as if only one half of (one or more of) these paradoxical antitheses was (self-evidently) true.

Thanks to John Gibert for helpful comments on the first section of this introduction, and to the contributors generally for help with the rest.

[1] Unless I specify otherwise, I use the terms 'Greek tragedy/ies', 'Athenian tragedy/ies', and 'the tragedies performed in the Theatre of Dionysus' interchangeably, to refer primarily to the 32 *tragōidiai* attributed to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides whose texts survive entire and secondarily (by extension) to all the other *tragōidiai* that were performed there during the fifth century. But of course not all these tragedies were alike in all respects.

Here (in no particular order) are the twelve principles:

1. Tragedies in Athens were performed BOTH (*a*) as part of a *polis*-organized Dionysian ritual AND (*b*) as theatrical entertainment.

2. These tragedies provided BOTH (*a*) individual psychological/mental stimulus for each viewer (audience member) AND (*b*) a collective psycho-social-behavioural impact on the mass audiences in the theatre.

3. The meaning (significance, impact, effect) of each of these tragedies was (and is) usually BOTH (*a*) <somewhat> coherent and intelligible AND (*b*) typically multi-layered and complex = a *mixed message*, one that might appeal differently to different audience members or even in different ways <simultaneously, or successively, more or less consciously> to the same audience member. [This would also mean that if the poet was supposed to be a 'teacher' of his fellow-citizens (as was and is quite widely believed: see 7 below), the 'lesson' that he imparted was probably not simple or straightforward.]

4. The audiences for these plays were BOTH (*a*) relatively <by today's standards> homogeneous, that is, mainly adult or adolescent Greek males, perhaps predominantly Athenian citizens and thus sharing a similar ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and military background; AND (*b*) quite heterogeneous as to class/status <and perhaps gender as well>, political allegiances, geopolitical base <rural/urban, citizen/metic/visitor>, and level of education.

5. These tragedies were designed for and appreciated by BOTH (*a*) a large, popular audience (perhaps 5,000 or even 10,000 for each performance) AND (*b*) a discriminating group of theatre connoisseurs (including other literary artists such as Aristophanes, Gorgias, and Plato). [Of course, hundreds of the audience members were themselves experienced choral performers.]

6. These plays BOTH (*a*) were designed to win a competition in a specific performance space, employing music, dance, costumes, (sets?) and skilled actors AND (*b*) were also soon made available (whether or not so originally intended) to be read carefully as texts.

7. These plays were received by their original audiences BOTH (*a*) <to some degree> as a kind of instruction (moral, civic, aesthetic, existential) about how (not) to live in this (their) world AND (*b*) <to some degree> as a kind of fantasy (play, 'what if...', make-believe) and temporary escape from (and distortion of) mundane reality.

8. These plays BOTH (*a*) were <like most specific works of art or literature, and like any public performance, anywhere> historically contingent, socially embedded cultural productions AND (*b*) have been (demonstrably) admired and appreciated (in various ways) during subsequent eras as universal, almost timeless, expressions of the human condition.

9. Our surviving Greek tragedies BOTH (*a*) comprise a single, fairly homogeneous, formally consistent, aesthetically/ethically/generically coherent art-form <whether or not they always exhibit the same distinctively 'tragic' or Greek or Athenian 'spirit'> AND (*b*) present us with thirty-two separate plays, composed over a period of almost seventy years, each with its distinctive plot, flavour, and meaning.

10. Fifth-century tragedy was BOTH (*a*) a specifically Attic art-form, designed for a very Athenocentric performance context AND (*b*) a conspicuously (and increasingly) panhellenic phenomenon, appreciated by audiences (and readers) all over the classical and Hellenistic Greek world.

11. Athenian tragedy is BOTH (*a*) extremely 'political' <i.e. all about the *polis* and the problems of living in a *polis*> AND (*b*) highly 'apolitical' <in that it often deals with mythological, divine, or universally human issues that antedate or ignore *polis*-formation in Greece and seem to have little overt political content>.

12. The 'politics' of the surviving tragedies <i.e. the explicit and implicit ideologies running through these plays> can appear at times BOTH (*a*) highly 'democratic' AND (*b*) markedly 'non-democratic' (even within the same play).

It would be easy to document some representative examples of the critical scholarship that occupies and defends each of these twenty-four positions. Several of the positions are represented, more or less explicitly, in papers included in this volume. Doubtless, too, different readers could propose some additional basic axioms to supplement mine, or to replace one or other of them. But I hope these twelve will suffice, as a preliminary clearing of the ground; and rather than trying to defend or explain each of them in detail, I will take them all as being self-evidently true, and as given.[2] Only in the case of principles 10–12 will I provide any further preliminary discussion here—since these three constitute the topic of this volume.

[2] I have argued elsewhere for several of these positions (most of which, of course, are not originally mine), and for combining them together rather than pitting them against one another as if only one half of any of these paradoxes can provide the 'correct' basis for interpreting Greek tragedy. For further documentation and explanation, please see in particular Griffith (1995), 62–8, 72–81, 107–24, (1998), 36–43, 75–80, (1999), 25–66, (2002), 203–37, (2005*b*), 161–5, 172–86, (2008). In general, the following (along with the contributors to this volume) seem to me to provide, in combination, a satisfactory battery of supporting argument for these twelve principles (and to provide plenty of further references): Bierl (1991); Carter (2004*a*), (2007); Csapo (2004*a*); Csapo and Miller (2007); Easterling (1997*a*); Föllinger (2009); Goldhill (1986), (1987/1990); Griffin (1998); E. Hall (1997), (2006), (2007); Halliwell (1986); Jameson (1981); Jens (1971); Kitto (1964); Kowalzig (2007); Lattimore (1964); Meier (1993); Revermann (2006*b*); Rhodes (2003); Roselli (2007), (forthcoming); Seaford (1981), (1994); Seidensticker (1982); Silk (2000); Sourvinou-Inwood (1994); Vernant (1988*a*); Williams (1977); Wilson (2000); Winkler and Zeitlin (1990); Wright (2009); Zeitlin (1996).

One potential objection should be acknowledged from the outset. Several of these 'positions' and principles are not found explicitly—nor perhaps even implicitly—in any of the pronouncements that survive from the various Greek theatregoers, critics, and theorists of the classical period (or even later) who have written about the value and point of tragic drama; some of them, indeed, involve concepts that were not critically articulated until the nineteenth or twentieth century. Yet even if this is true (and in reality I should say that relatively few of the twenty-four positions that I have outlined cannot in fact be supported by reference to specific written documents or material remains from fifth- or fourth-century Greek contexts), this would not be a fatal objection: surely emic as well as etic explanations should always be welcome and can potentially be illuminating, whether we regard ourselves as practising anthropology, the sociology of culture, or 'pure' literary-artistic criticism. Nonetheless, I concede that it might seem to be a significant objection to Principles 8(*a*), 10(*a*), 11(*a*), and 12(*a*) that Aristotle, in particular, seems quite oblivious to these possibilities, and has indeed appeared to many critics to be arguing that tragedy is 'representing/imitating' (*mimeisthai*) only their opposites. Thus nowhere in the *Poetics* is the 'Athenianness' of tragedy—nor even the actual Theatre of Dionysus—mentioned; nor is the *polis* or its institutions ever identified as an 'object of representation' or as being integral to tragic action or the tragic effect(s).[3] Instead, for Aristotle, the subject-matter of tragedy is supposed to be 'events' (*pragmata, praxeis*) and 'suffering' (*pathos*) experienced and inflicted primarily by members of an elite family group on one another (*philoi*).[4] He stipulates that the major characters should be 'noble, serious' and 'those of great renown'—which, in a fifth- or fourth-century Greek context, surely would entail that they be high-status leaders of some kind (mythical or historical kings and queens, chieftains, *stratēgoi, tyrannoi, manteis*, adventuring aristocratic heroes, etc.); and Aristotle remains appropriately non-committal as to what kind of political regime is imagined to be in place in a typical tragedy. This reticence of his seems wise, for the plays rarely focus at all closely on the constitution of this

[3] E. Hall (1996*b*). Nor does Aristotle mention cults, ritual, aetiologies, etc. as comprising a significant component of mature tragedy's focus or function (though he does specify that tragedy and comedy evolved 'out of' cult activities: dithyramb, phallic performances, *to satyrikon*, etc.).

[4] For tragedy as representing violence (actual or narrowly averted) among *philoi*, see Arist. *Poet.* 1452^{a}31, 1453^{b}15 ff. with Lucas (1968) and Halliwell (1986), *ad locc.*; also Blundell (1989), Belfiore (2000). On tragedy as representation of a 'serious, noble, important' action (*μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας*, Arist. *Poet.* 1449^{b}24) performed by 'people in high standing' (*ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ*, 1453^{a}9) who are 'better than us' (*βελτίονας ἢ καθ' ἡμᾶς*, 1448^{a}4, cf. ^{a}18), see Halliwell (1986); Griffith (1995), (1998) with further references.

or that city or region[5] or military camp in which the action is taking place or being decided; and when they do so focus, the results (notoriously) tend to be confusing and indeterminate.[6]

Nevertheless, a high proportion of the critics who have written in English about Greek tragedy during the last twenty-five years or so have based their interpretations (implicitly or explicitly) on the principle that these plays are centrally concerned with issues of democracy and civic identity: Athenianness (origins, institutions, imperialist policies, etc.), the validation and/or interrogation of democratic values and institutions (as against the 'old' values of aristocracy and tyranny), and the gender politics of Athenian public and private life in general. These critics seldom refer to Aristotle; or if they do, it is generally with disapproval.

Was Aristotle simply wrong to ignore so utterly the 'Athenianness' of tragedy and the democratic (and religious) aspects of Attic drama in general? Do we now know better than he? Yes: I should have to say that Aristotle was indeed 'wrong' (or over-reticent) about these as about certain other aspects of the origins, nature, focus, and point of tragedy—even while I should also insist that his work (if we include the *Politics* and *Rhetoric* alongside the incomplete *Poetics*) still provides by far the most complete and helpful analysis that we possess from the ancient world, not just of tragic drama, but also of the point and value of play, representation, music, rhetoric, and fiction in general.

Aristotle was not originally an Athenian, of course—any more than were most of the cleverest and most original Greek intellectuals of the sixth to fourth centuries; but he was teaching (and writing for) a broadly Hellenic clientele of students in the Lyceum, and by the mid-fourth century theatres and tragic performances had spread all over the Greek world.[7] His *Poetics*—which is a very short book—focuses only on those aspects of drama (and poetry, even performance in general) that Aristotle thought most interesting, important, and universal. In particular, this work shows little of Plato's fascination for choral performance and the educational/ethical role of poetry, music,

[5] Many 5th-cent. Greeks lived in communities that, on one definition, could be called a *polis* (because they were capable of operating as a political unit, putting armies into the field, and participating in collective decisions, etc.), yet had no urban centre, no city-walls, no single religious-cultural focus (*akropolis*, cult-centre): e.g. the Phocians, Thessalians; and even the Spartans were distributed among four quite separate towns. Even in Attica, residency in a rural deme could entail distinctly different behaviours and obligations from those that we associate with the responsibilities of an Athenian *politēs*.

[6] See Vernant (1988*a*); Easterling (1997*c*); Griffith (1995); etc., for this mixture of pre-*polis*, monarchical, mythical-heroic elements with more contemporary-specific-democratic ones; also Rhodes (2003).

[7] Easterling (1997*b*).

and dance.[8] Modern scholars have succeeded in going beyond (or behind) Aristotle in some areas, so as to insist on the significance also of the topographical, visual, ritual, 'religious', choral, and socio-political contexts in which Athenian drama was first performed.[9] It would seem silly, indeed, for anyone nowadays to seek to undo or contradict completely the scholarly efforts of these last few decades, and to insist instead solely on the formal-aesthetic, or philosophical or—any single: you-name-it—'meaning' or 'purpose' of the plays instead, as if plays (or books, or movies...) have only one kind of meaning and work in only one kind of way on their audience(s)/reader(s).

Overall, even a casual observer (reader) should be able to note that (1) many of the surviving tragedies have quite a lot to do with Athens (10(*a*)) even while ALSO (10(*b*)) these same tragedies have other things going on as well that are not at all exclusive to Athens nor focused on democracy—and conversely that (2) many of the plays whose plots have rather little to do with Athens nonetheless bring into focus issues that seem highly relevant to Athens and its democracy. (And for 'Athens', one could obviously substitute another term, such as 'Dionysus' or 'sacrificial violence', or 'playing the other'.) Tragedies, we can agree, thus tend to be 'about' many different things at once.

One final point of clarification is perhaps called for. This is not exactly a 'principle' or 'axiom', but nonetheless a crucial issue that is all too often ignored in discussions of the 'meaning' or correct 'interpretation' or 'social function' of Greek drama. In insisting (principle 3(*b*), above) that Athenian audiences probably reacted in multi-layered and disparate ways to watching and thinking about these plays, and that even a single audience member (spectator, *theatēs*)[10] might often have experienced interestingly and pleasantly discordant responses to watching and listening to any particular episode of a play, I do not wish to open the door completely to free-for-all interpretation and the abandonment of critical judgement. On the contrary, I think that a responsible critic's job is

[8] But of course Aristotle did also write a separate work of *Politics*, where several of these issues are introduced. And Aristotle's emphasis in the *Poetics* on 'plot' and poetic structure should not obscure the fact that in general he also acknowledges the fundamental importance of music (rhythm, harmony, melodies) as well as the visual impact of drama; he also recognizes the powerful effect of skilled acting.

[9] See now Csapo and Miller (2007) on the ritual origins.

[10] The issue, whether we term those attending dramatic performances in the Theatre of Dionysus 'spectators, viewers' (as in Greek *theatai, theōmenoi*) or 'audience' (as in Latin *auditōres*) is not trivial. Film critics routinely emphasize 'spectatorship', the camera's 'eye', the 'viewer's gaze', etc.; theatre criticism tends to prefer 'audience', though with a rather watered-down sense of the auditory component. Those Classicists who write about Greek tragedy and who treat the texts as scripts for performance rather than pieces of literature still, by and large, tend to prefer the term 'audience'—partly, no doubt, because we actually possess some texts (which were heard) but lack the choreography, scenery, masks, and costumes (which were seen).

precisely to try to parse, unravel, dissect, and describe the various responses that a given expression (or interaction, or scene, or whole play) would have elicited from the various watchers and listeners in the theatre. Reception theory can certainly help here. Psychoanalytic theory of one kind and another can help too. But much of the work necessarily consists of good old-fashioned philology.

2. AUDIENCE STUDIES AND HISTORICISM (CARTER)

The foregoing prompts me to consider the shared method of the chapters to follow (this section), before focusing on the purpose of this volume and the questions to be answered (section 3).

The 'responsible critic's job' as described by Mark Griffith is an exercise in what we might call 'audience studies'.[11] These are investigations into what a literary text meant (or means, in the modern reception of Greek tragedy) to members of a particular audience; distinct from criticism of the text in isolation, or the personal response of the critic, or the attempt to reconstruct the author's intention. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a large part of Greek tragic scholarship has been concerned, in one way or another, with what the plays might have meant for the audience of first production. This kind of scholarship can be called 'historicist' in a broad sense. On this methodology, taken to its logical (though not essential or widespread) conclusion, the text ceases to be a piece of literature to be studied or criticized and becomes instead just one part of the evidence for a performance that went on between poet, actors, and audience;[12] this performance was in turn part of a wider event, a religious festival of the *polis*. Even Jasper Griffin (1998, cf. 1999*b*), who is widely characterized as having led the charge against historicism in Anglophone tragic studies, begins his own version of the 'social function' of tragedy by asking what the plays meant to the original audience; in this sense his work is part of the same historicist project (cf. Duncan, this volume, 77–8).

The essays in this volume share the methodology of audience studies to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps the most sophisticated example is the

[11] Carter (2007), 6; cf. Griffith (1995), 72ff. with further references in n. 42. The term 'audience studies' has some currency in modern media studies, frequently supported by the sort of evidence (viewing figures, audience surveys, etc.) that is unavailable to the historian of the ancient Greek theatre: see e.g. Brooker and Jermyn (2003).

[12] Cf. Pelling (1997*b*), 213–14. On aspects of the 'New Historicism', see (usefully, *inter multa alia*) Greenblatt (1989); Montrose (1989); and Cox and Reynolds (1993), 3–8 for an overview with further bibliography. On the application of New Historicism to Hellenic studies in general and tragedy in particular: Goff (1995*b*).