

Continuity and change in Greek tragedy under postclassical conditions¹

Recently Jacqueline de Romilly has stressed the idea of continuous renewal in Greek literature, arguing for «un puissant et constant renouvellement» in which are reflected the intense differences of the epochs and individuals². In particular Greek tragedy is an example of continuous literary renewal. *πολλὰς μεταβολὰς μεταβλοῦσα* — this is the way Aristotle summed up in «Poetics» (1449 a 14) the multiple changes that tragic drama could look back upon³. From the obscure primary stage of improvisation, where early choral forms can be assumed, to the first state-sponsored tragic performance by Thespis in 536/35-534/33 profound changes undoubtedly occurred in the function and structure of a developing form of art which became established as tragedy in the above-mentioned Thespis production at the latest. The process of development was continued above all by the work of the three great Attic tragedians, each of whom contributed decisively in shaping the further functional and structural possibilities of tragedy. The Aristotelian statement quoted at the beginning according to which tragedy «underwent many changes», holds particularly true for the fifth century.

Whatever Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides unmistakably did, through their individual understanding of tragedy —, whatever they did for the shaping of the tragic genre cannot be stated here in detail.

¹ This communication is based on Kuch 1991, an article which has been reshaped and supplemented.

² de Romilly 1986: 37. Cf. also de Romilly 1988.

³ In comparison with tragedy the development of comic drama was less well known to Aristotle, as his remarks in «Poetics» 1449 a 37-1449 b 5 reveal. On change in Aristophanes cf. Sommerstein 1984.

5. Paestan bell-crater. Museo Provinciale, Salerno (found at Pontecagnano).

We should first try to reflect in a general observation how far fifth century tragedy not only stands out from the early stages of tragic art, but also from the postclassical development as well. Secondly it is necessary to show the new paths tragic drama took in the fourth century and to consider how its function changed or rather changed anew. On the basis of existing texts the functional changes that took place in the course of the fourth century may obviously be easier to survey than the functional changes that must be attributed to the dimly recognizable Thespis model in comparison to the even more dimly recognizable archaic protoforms. But there is no doubt that fifth century classical tragedy, compared to the first form of the genre dating from the second half of the sixth century, displayed an almost incomparable poetic level, although it is difficult to characterize adequately the rather indeterminate Thespis model.

In the fifth century tragic poetry reached its zenith in the context of Athenian polis democracy. Not long ago Christian Meier convincingly explained the connections between the democratic city-state and tragic poetry, and he succeeded in demonstrating the political art of Greek tragedy⁴. The drama flourished on the fertile soil of material and spiritual conditions that were determined by resolute acquisition and productive advancement. Here, we shall just briefly refer to the consistently operating power of the Athenian League, the pronounced forms of slavery, the social contradictions in general including those among privileged citizens. Last but not least, we must recall the conflicts between social opposites that pervaded the political life of the city-state⁵ and were reflected in its rich spiritual life, to which the drama belonged as an integral, even outstanding part.

Fifth century drama, however, was not only a mirror reflecting the development of the polis, but also an agent of its own that was actively influencing the life of the city-state⁶. Tragedy, like comedy, carried on a dialogue with the audience, beginning in the publicity of the Dionysus theatre. It was continued in the intellectual debates

triggered by the drama's message. Whenever dramatic poetry was brought into communicative and functional relationship with the polis⁷, an important insight has to be taken into account which has only recently been obtained through the theory of communication. According to this theory, communicative action cannot in principle be limited exclusively to the transmission of information or the inter-individual interaction, but serves to exchange ideas and interests, to develop attitudes and to make use of sociohistorical experience⁸. Communication means nothing less than «a process aiming at the internal organization and inner evolution of society as a whole»⁹. This insight particularly applies to the communication of Greek drama.

The communicative relationship between dramatic poetry and Athenian society was, in the form of a real dialogue, obviously an intensive interrelation. Within this interplay, tragedy developed into an important form of collective self-understanding. With the perspectives which it pointed out and with the proposals it made, tragedy influenced mental processes of the polis and took part in shaping its society in a responsible and critical manner. It was the aim of tragedy to serve the community but it approached this aim from different positions. Farsighted and progressive intentions could be found side by side with pronounced conservative ones which had the effect of consolidating the establishment. Evidence of the social function that tragic poetry had in the fifth century is primarily apparent in the «Frogs» by Aristophanes (cf. above all 1006-1058).

Not long after this literary comedy was put on stage (405), in the fourth century a fundamental functional change occurred in the tragic genre, being closely connected with the changed historical conditions. The fact that in the polis symptoms of crisis were noticeable some time earlier must not be overlooked in this context¹⁰. The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War (404) was a dramatic

⁷ Cf. Kuch 1989a, with relevant literature.

⁸ Lerchner 1987: 16; cf. Leont'ev 1984: 47 f.

⁹ Leont'ev 1984: 54; Lerchner 1987: 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Lehmann 1987: 33-73; Welskopf (ed.) 1974; Zimmermann 1989: 36 speaks of the breakdown «des demokratischen Konsenses»; cf. also ib. 35.

turning point in Athenian history. The political hegemony of the city had come to an end; all attempts to restore it could not recover the old powerful position¹¹. With regard to theatre we cannot speak of a definite turning point in 404 with the same right as we did in considering the historical development. The relatively independent development of processes in the theatre, still keeping the old level, went some way beyond this fatal point. Excellent masterpieces of tragic poetry had their première at that time. «Oedipus at Colonus» by Sophocles, who had died in 406/05, was put on stage in 401, and the last plays by Euripides — he died in 407/06 — were also put on the stage of the Dionysus theatre at Athens posthumously: «Iphigenia in Aulis», «Alcmaeon of Corinth» as well as the «Bacchae», dramatic plays written by Euripides in the self-chosen Macedonian exile. We do not know the year when the plays were first performed. It may have been between 405 and about 400¹², although the years after the catastrophe of 404 are more probable when we take the events of the war into account. In any case the plays by Sophocles and Euripides, put on stage posthumously, were the last highlights of a creative genre which proved its worth both in actively influencing and responsibly shaping the polis.

As already mentioned, the function of tragedy took a different turn in the fourth century under the changing historical circumstances. There is no doubt that the communicative relations between drama and society continued to exist, but with a basically different character. As a result of the city-state's relatively limited possibilities at that time, the political commitment of tragedy decreased. The tendency to bring suspense and distractions into tragic drama including the production of show-effects predominated as is apparent in «Rhesus», the only tragedy of the fourth century B. C. which has survived intact¹³.

¹¹ This, too, is the conclusion of Schmitz 1988: 324 f.

¹² Snell and Kannicht 1986: DID C 22.

¹³ Ebener 1966. In contrast to this Ritchie 1964: 361 considers the «Rhesus» to be an early work by Euripides dating back to between 455 and 440; similarly Burnett 1985b: 50 f.; but cf. Lesky 1972: 527 f. and Tammaro 1989: 120 f. Cf. now Easterling, this volume.

This play was transmitted among Euripides' works, but it was not written by him. In some respect Euripides paved the way for the trend of the times, although the external and scenic elements did not affect the internal design of his plays. It was the tenth book of the «Iliad», the so-called «Doloneia», which was dramatized in «Rhesus», and the tragedian provided for dramatization in the figurative sense, too. He intended to lay out the adventurous moments of the epic scene in a military camp that the Trojans had pitched outside their city. Right at the beginning there is some unrest on stage, when the Trojan guards, frightened by fire signals that flame up near the Greeks' anchorage ground, alert their commander Hector (1-51). Dolon's bold scouting patrol to the Greek camp, a Greek counter-action carried out by Odysseus and Diomedes, who assault Rhesus, the Thracian king and Trojan ally who had just arrived in the camp — they kill him in his sleep —, finally their spectacular escape in the course of which they ultimately kill Dolon — all these events, full of risk and well suited for an adventure story, have the intention of portraying a diversified and exciting action.

Further characteristics of this postclassical tragedy are rhetorical and pathetic elements in connection with an emphatic self-presentation by the characters¹⁴. Hector's praise of his deeds seems relatively modest (406-411). He claims to have made Rhesus master of the Thracians by enslaving the people and handing them over to him: σοὶ δὲ δουλώσας λείω / παρέσχον (410 f.). But in boasting Hector is surpassed by his ally Rhesus. After having censured the best Trojan hero on account of his allegedly dragging strategy (444-446), Rhesus proclaims he will destroy the Greek army and finish the Trojan War in the course of one day (447-450). Over and above that, Rhesus intends to undertake a military expedition against Greece (471) and to devastate all Hellas: καὶ πάσαν ἐλθὼν Ἑλλάδα, ἐκέρουσι δοῦν (472). What we are told by Rhesus recalls the way of talking that a special type excels in: the ἀλαζών, the braggart, of New Comedy. The Pyrgopolinices of Plautus' «Miles gloriosus», for

¹⁴ Cf. *Rhesus* 393-421; 422-453; 467-473; 488-491; 510-517.

instance¹⁵, gives a clear idea of this type. «Miles gloriosus» can be traced back to a post-Menandrian comedy Ἀλαζών. It is significant of Pyrgopolinices that he is flattered as having slain some hundreds of men during one day (45: uno die). Thus he seems to be as effective as Rhesus promises to become (cf. Rhesus 447-449: ἐμοὶ δὲ φῶς ἔν ἡλίου καταφέρεσει / πέροσαντι πύργου νουστάθιμοις ἐπέστεσειν / κτείνωαί τ' Ἀχαιοῦς). The «Rhesus» drama does not anticipate New comedy, but there is no doubt that the fourth century tragedy anticipates comic features of this form of comedy.

It would not be justified, however, to deny the play has any tragic contents. The early death of a brave man is tragic in principle. This applies to both Hector and Achilles and also to Rhesus¹⁶. Nevertheless it cannot be overlooked that the undoubtedly tragic aspect of Rhesus in the play of that name falls short of the conception of tragedy, particularly if compared with the outstanding achievements of the fifth century; nor was the tragic aspect meant to be a decisive driving force of dramatic action. 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. This trend led away from the heights of tragic art towards mere drama and show.

Fragments preserved from dramatic plays of postclassical times fit more or less into the picture revealed by «Rhesus». The remnants handed down illustrate that fourth century tragic poetry had a diversified content which can be analysed in a systematic way. As G. Xanthakis-Karamanos in her London thesis has shown, pathetic, melodramatic and rhetorical elements seem largely to characterize the tragic genre in postclassical times¹⁷. There was also an interest in narrative passages. In addition themes from the most different areas

become apparent, comprising reflections about man, religious beliefs, supernatural factors and ethical ideas. In the end we even find traces of debates on social and political issues, although this is rare. The fact that there was a certain continuity in the history of the tragic genre cannot be denied taking all this into consideration. On the other hand, the remaining fragments of tragedies dating from the fourth century also affirm the functional change, as illustrated in «Rhesus», at least as far as a reorientation or a drive for effective presentation emerge from them¹⁸.

For the spiritual development of the fourth century two views, going beyond the polis, acquired considerable importance: panhellenism and cosmopolitanism. Explicit evidence for the former, however, is lacking in the fragments of tragedies remaining from that time, and cosmopolitanism too can hardly be exemplified on the basis of these fragments¹⁹. The fact that Panhellenic and cosmopolitan ideas may have figured to a far greater degree in fourth century tragic theatre is suggested by the intensive interest in Euripides²⁰. Besides other dramatic plays, «Iphigenia in Aulis» — with all the play's contradictions between ideal and reality — was particularly suited to be a vehicle for panhellenic ideas, and cosmopolitan expressions can be found elsewhere in Euripides' work. «The whole of heaven may be crossed by the eagle, the whole of earth is fatherland for a high-minded man», as fragment 1047 Nauck has it:

ἄσπας μὲν ἀήρ ἀίετ' ὧ πέράσσιμος,
ἄσπασα δὲ χθὼν ἀνδρὶ γενναίῳ πατρίς.

In a fragment of «Phaethon» (fr. 777 Nauck) it is said that «everywhere the nourishing earth is fatherland»: ὡς πανταχοῦ γε πατρίς ἡ βόσκουσα γῆ, without confining the assertion to the high-minded man. The statement has not any precondition. Lastly fragment 902 Nauck should not be omitted, where the high-minded

¹⁵ There are other examples, too; cf. W. Hofmann 1987: 436 f.

¹⁶ Cf. Rhesus 974-977 combining Achilles and Rhesus under the aspect of mortality. Rhesus is eager for fighting, heroically ἰὼν κατὰ στόμα (511), comparable to Hector (cf. 409: κατὰ στόμα). But Rhesus is unfairly slain when asleep, and moreover by chance, for it was proposed to kill Hector.

¹⁷ Cf. Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980; Easterling, this volume.

¹⁸ Cf. Snell 1971: 138-169; Ghiron-Bistagne 1974. For the literary process in the fourth century cf. Xanthakis-Karamanos 1985, Xanthakis-Karamanos 1988.

¹⁹ Adesp. fr. 392 Nauck. Snell and Kannicht 1986: 90 Crates? It must be doubted that this is really a fragment of a tragedy; cf. ib. Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 160 f. with confidence; cf. also ib. 3-5.

²⁰ Kuch 1978.

one emerges again. He is declared friend, even if he is dwelling in a distant country, far away, even if he has never been seen by the person speaking:

τὸν ἐφθλὸν ἀνόρα, καὶ ἐκὰς ναίτη χθονός,
καὶν μίποτ' ὄσσοις εἰσίδω, κρίνω φιλόν¹.

It may be assumed that not least those Euripidean plays were performed in the fourth-century that were in line with the topical ideas of the time. And another possibility seems worth considering. With regard to remarkable cases of imitation and adaptation of Euripides by postclassical tragic poetry²², it must be taken into account that panhellenic and cosmopolitan themes within Euripidean poetry might have become the subject of this imitation and adaptation²³. In the absence of sufficient testimony this is an attempt to deduce a presumed special reception of Euripides from the general and evident one.

Against the background of an intensive interest in Euripidean tragedies, it is also worth reflecting how far other phenomena of new polis-transcending Euripidean thinking might have been present in fourth century drama. This suggestion applies particularly to the conception of a new individuality that went beyond traditional polis standards and opened up new chances for man, but in many cases new chances more especially for the woman. Phaedra, Bellerophonites, Antiope and Hypsipyle shall be mentioned here as examples from the long series of Euripidean characters.

Apart from specific and genuine aspects postclassical tragic poetry had, there were also serious attempts to cherish the «old» tragedy, as it was called in the Didascalia, for its constructive potential was vital to post-classical times, too. It was quite soon (386) — hardly 20 years after the «Frogs» by Aristophanes (405) had the

²¹ Cf. also *Helen* 906 f.; fr. 1113 Nauck, by Nauck attributed to the fragmenta dubia et spuria.

²² Cf. Webster 1954b; Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 28-34 and the references given there.

²³ Cf. above all «Iphigenia in Aulis» and the above mentioned evidence of cosmopolitan ideas in Euripides; cf. also n. 19. On «Ritual and the politics of panhellenism» in «Iphigenia in Aulis» cf. Foley 1985: 92-102.

brilliant idea of visiting the dead masters of tragedy in Hades, i.e. taking the audience down there with the underworld-visitors in the play, it was quite soon, indeed, that it came to a revival of fifth century tragedies within the festival of the Great Dionysia²⁴. Responsible people obviously went on regarding the message of these plays as a vehicle of shaping and guiding consciousness²⁵, under the new circumstances of the second Attic League and the conflicts with the powers rising in the fourth century, with Macedonia in particular. The process of revitalizing classical tragedy favoured Euripidean drama which had artistically anticipated not only the new mood²⁶ but essential tendencies of fourth century development, too²⁷.

What encouraging effects were attributed to fifth century Attic tragedy even under the conditions of an intensifying crisis of the polis becomes apparent with the revival of old plays from 386 on and, above all, with the activities of the Attic politician Lycurgus with regard to the theatre of his city after 338. On his initiative the Dionysus theatre was sumptuously reconstructed. The simple facility was replaced by a stone construction which was impressing by beauty and utility²⁸. Lycurgus had statues of the three great Attic tragedians erected in the rebuilt Dionysus theatre²⁹ — what place could have been more appropriate? —, and he provided for an official version of their texts which became binding for the theatre production³⁰. These measures bespeak a new mood of looking back to the great and classical time of Athens and its excellent achievements in tragic poetry. Lycurgus and his conservative circle³¹ had the

²⁴ Snell and Kannicht 1986: DID A 1, 201-203. Cf. Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 99 f. Soon after Aeschylus' death (456/55) the right to revive plays of Aeschylus was granted by the Athenian Assembly; cf. ib. 86. On the revival of Sophoclean tragedies after Sophocles' death (406/05) cf. Müller 1985.

²⁵ Cf. Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 100 f.

²⁶ Xanthakis-Karamanos 1980: 3f.

²⁷ Kuch 1978: 199-201.

²⁸ Cf. in particular Pickard-Cambridge 1946: 136-138. Simon 1972: 10 f. Blume 1978: 50f.

²⁹ Lesky 1971: 684.

³⁰ Cf. Ps.-Plutarch, *Vitae X oratorum* 841 f.

³¹ Cf. Ps.-Plutarch, *Vitae X oratorum* 841 bc.

obvious intention to save in the spiritual field what had been irrevocably lost in the political field. Athens had suffered the definitive loss of its political power. This became most strikingly clear with the defeat at Chaeronea in 338. Given the pressing historical circumstances, polis consciousness, traditionally developed by the defeated and weakened forces, was of an expressly retrospective kind.

A remarkable speech is extant by Lycurgus, who deserved well of Athens and Attic theatre after Chaeronea. The old ideals are conjured up in the text. In his «Speech against Leocrates»³² Lycurgus accuses an Athenian citizen of having disengaged himself from the polis after the catastrophe at Chaeronea for the sake of personal security, ignoring thereby a resolution of the people. After, almost contrary to expectations, a relatively gentle treatment of the city was granted by the magnanimous Macedonian conquerors and after there was no more threat to life and liberty Leocrates (331) would have wanted to re-establish his domicile in Athens under what were now sufficiently safe conditions. In opposition to Leocrates who had left his polis, Lycurgus recalls the example of «the old» (98: τῶν παλαιῶν). Euripides is praised (100). The fact that the tragedian was thoroughly considered to be an «excellent poet» (ib.: ἀγαθὸς ποιητής) corresponds to the overall evaluation within fourth century Euripides reception. The emphasis placed on political ethos seems to be a decisive element. To Lycurgus' mind the tragic poet deserves praise, indeed «justified» praise (ib.), not only for his poetic qualities but particularly due to the choice of subject made with «Erechtheus». The «Erechtheus», possibly dating from 422³³, together with the «Heracidae» (from 430 presumably) and the «Hicetides» (from 424 presumably) belong to a creative period when the poet was setting constructive values of polis democracy. To Lycurgus Euripides regarded (100: ἠγρομένους) the «story» (ib.: τὰς ... πράξεις) of «Erechtheus» as an «outstanding example for the citizens» (ib.: κάλλιστον ἂν γενέσθαι τοῖς πολίταις παράδειγμα). It is natural to understand the poet's view on his work as the poet's intention with

his work so that an intended Euripidean effect would have been realized. Love for the fatherland (ib.: τὸ τῆν πατρίδα φιλεῖν) was to be developed by the actions in the story. This is Lycurgus' way of articulating his understanding of Euripides, and he seems to be right in interpreting the tragedian's aspirations.

According to Lycurgus the impetus intended by the poet starts particularly from the speech of Praxithaea (fr. 360 Nauck). To Lycurgus (100) these verses show greatness of mind and generosity, worthy of the polis and a daughter of Cephisus, the god of the Attic river of that name, recalling an old tradition of Attica. In the speech by Cephisus' daughter Praxithaea, who gives her own daughter for the salvation of the city, not primarily the sacrifice but rather the appreciation of the city seems to be important. The thought of the polis runs like a red thread through this speech. In other words, the focus of the Praxithaea speech is the polis (cf. Euripides, fr. 360 Nauck, 5 f.; 8-13; 16 f.; 20 f.; 23; 27; 35; 40; 42; 47; 52³⁴). Objectifying the fundamental diction of the speaker this meant to put aside personal interests for the cause of the polity. These ideas (cf. ib. 5), developed by the Euripidean Praxithaea with the view of justifying human sacrifice, vary in their persuasive power and they are in general not a little problematic, but that fact is not further explained by Lycurgus. He rather stresses the educative function (cf. 101: ἐπαίδευσ) which in his opinion the speech by Praxithaea did have in the fifth century. Accordingly, with the example of this woman Euripides would have intended to strengthen men's patriotic conviction. In the «Erechtheus» by Euripides Lycurgus perceives values like patriotism and commitment to the native polis, which should not be left as it was by Leocrates according to Lycurgus (cf. 101). In the speaker's opinion the values set by Euripides also apply to his own time and he recalls them in the public forum of the lawsuit. The «Speech against Leocrates» shows that the youngest of the three great Attic tragedians had something essential to contribute to the fourth century even concerning the commitment to the polis. It speaks in favour of his authority also with regard to this question that by Lycurgus Euripides is placed in one traditional line with

³² Conomis 1970.

³³ Cf. n. 39.

³⁴ Cf. also 7: λέως, 15 and 53-55: πατρίς, 39: γαῖα, 13: πολίτης, 50: πολίται.

Homer (102), Tyrtaeus (107) and Simonides (109), a line headed by the tragedian.

Although a politician and man of theatre like Lycurgus based his view on the polis ethos as set by Euripides and although Euripides himself became the model for postclassical tragic poetry — precisely when new horizons were sought for —, stage effects and technical sophistication, rhetoric pathos and sentimentality seem to have prevailed in the tragic genre of the fourth century. Aristotle found a lack of characters in most of the new tragedians (Poetics 1450 a 25 f.), which meant a considerable loss in substance, and it is a bad sign when actors could get the better of poets³⁵. Furthermore, show-effects were produced by interventions of the director in the drama³⁶. Under these circumstances and changed in these ways, tragedy tried to go on and apparently succeeded in fascinating the audience, since theatre as a whole went on spreading in the fourth century.

From the «Poetics» by Aristotle³⁷ it can be gathered that a new way of drama-reception developed at this very time: individual reading. With the advance of written texts reading became additional to theatre productions. By the way, it was just the theatre god who in «Frogs» by Aristophanes presented himself as the «lonely reader» (cf. 52 f.)³⁸. Anyhow, he was not the first one, since there is evidence for individual reading in the «Erechtheus» by Euripides before³⁹. There it says (fr. 369, 6 f. Nauck): «... and from tablets with writing I should like to unfold the voice (δέλτων τ' ἀναπτύσσομι γῆρυν) that is

³⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3, 1403 b 33.

³⁶ Cf. the scholion to Euripides, *Orestes* 57.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1462 a 11-13; 1453 b 3-6; 1450 b 17 f.

³⁸ Cf. Havelock 1980; especially 89 (reprinted in: Havelock 1982: 261-313). Cf. also Havelock 1986. In the review of this book by Rösler 1989 the work done by Havelock is also appreciated; other references on the matter of orality and literacy ib. See also now Thomas 1989.

³⁹ Knox 1985: 9. The «Erechtheus» by Euripides, however, does not date back to 412, as indicated ib., but possibly to 422; cf. Lesky 1972: 368. Collard 1981: 2. Treu 1971 expressed himself in favour of 423. Metrical reasons point to 416, a date based on the analysis of fragments; cf. Cropp and Fick 1985: 79 f. — The «lonely reader» was found by Pöhlmann 1988: 15 on two vase-paintings from as early as the first quarter of the fifth century: ARV² = Beazley 1963) 452 and ARV² 231, 83, without being allowed to speak of a developed literacy here.

praised by reasonable men». Thus, the reception mediated by writing which developed in the fourth century is found to have been prepared in anticipating beginnings in the fifth century and, taking Euripides into consideration again, an anticipation can also be stated with the view to aesthetic innovations.

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