

A COMPANION TO GREEK TRAGEDY

Edited by

Justina Gregory

**A COMPANION
TO
GREEK TRAGEDY**

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to Greek tragedy / edited by Justina Gregory.
p. cm.—(Blackwell companions to the ancient world. Ancient history)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-0770-9 (alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 1-4051-0770-7 (alk. paper)

I. Greek drama (Tragedy)—History and criticism. I. Gregory, Justina.
II. Series.

PA3131.C56 2006

882'.0109—dc22

2004024920

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12pt Galliard
by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India.
Printed and bound in India
by Replika Press Ltd.

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on
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www.blackwellpublishing.com



Maenad and *aulos*-player. Attic red-figure pelike in the style of the earlier Mannerists. ca. 460 BCE. BPK Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin. Photo: Johannes Laurentius.

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Contributors

William Allan is McConnell Laing Fellow and Tutor in Classics at University College, Oxford. His publications include *The Andromache and Euripidean Tragedy* (Oxford, 2000; paperback, 2003), *Euripides: The Children of Heracles* (Aris and Phillips, 2001), and *Euripides: Medea* (Duckworth, 2002). He is currently writing a commentary on Euripides' *Helen* for the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series.

Herman Altena is a freelance academic and translator with a one-man business, Antiek Theater. He teaches ancient Greek drama and its reception in the Netherlands at the Department of Theater Studies of the University of Utrecht. He has translated several Greek tragedies for the Dutch professional theater and worked as a dramaturge. He is the Dutch representative in the European Network of Research and Documentation of Ancient Greek Drama.

Michael J. Anderson is an associate professor of Classics at Yale University. His principal research interests are archaic and classical Greek poetry and the Greek novels. His book *The Fall of Troy in Early Greek Poetry and Art* (Oxford,

1997) includes a study of treatments of the sack of Troy in Athenian tragedy.

Luigi Battezzato studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, at the University of California, Berkeley, and at University College London. He has written a book on monologues in Euripides, and several articles on Greek tragedy. His research interests include literary and social problems in ancient Greek texts. He has also published on textual criticism, and on ancient Greek language and meter. He teaches at the Università del Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, Italy.

Douglas Cairns has taught at the universities of St. Andrews, Otago, Leeds, and Glasgow, and is now Professor of Classics in the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Aidós: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (1993) and editor of *Oxford Readings in Homer's Iliad* (2001) and (with R. A. Knox) of *Law, Rhetoric, and Comedy in Classical Athens* (2004).

Neil Croally assisted in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Thebans* in 1990–91. His doctorate was

published as *Euripidean Polemic* by Cambridge University Press in 1994. Since 1990 he has taught Classics at Dulwich College in London. Teaching has left little time for theorizing; instead he has used his school's resources to stage a number of Greek plays in a variety of inauthentic ways. He thanks Jo, Mary, and Puss.

Martin Cropp is Professor of Greek and Roman Studies at the University of Calgary. He studied at Oxford and Toronto before moving to Calgary in 1974. His books include commentaries on Euripides' *Electra* (1988) and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (2000), contributions to *Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays* (Vol. 1: 1995; Vol. 2: 2004) with Christopher Collard, Kevin Lee, and John Gibert, and the edited volume *Euripides and Late Fifth Century Tragic Theatre* (*Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25, 1999–2000, with Kevin Lee, David Sansone, and others).

John Davidson holds the Chair of Classics at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where he has been since 1969 after completing a doctorate at London. T. B. L. Webster Fellow at the School of Advanced Studies in London in 2003, he has published extensively on various aspects of Greek drama, including theatrical production and the relationship between the Homeric texts and the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides.

Paula Debnar, an associate professor of Classics at Mount Holyoke College, is the author of *Speaking the Same Language: Speech and Audience in Thucydides' Spartan Debates* (2001) and several articles on the rhetoric of Thucydidean speakers. She is currently at work on an article on the figure of Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and a study of the Spartan general Brasidas.

Salvatore Di Maria is Professor of Italian at the University of Tennessee. His scholarly interests range from Dante and Ariosto (his annotated bibliography of Ariosto was published by the University of Missouri Press in 1984) to Machiavelli's theater and political writings. He recently published *The Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance* (Bucknell, 2002). At present he is working on the originality of imitation in the Renaissance theater.

Mary Ebbott is an assistant professor of Classics at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, and an executive editor for the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC. She is the author of *Imagining Illegitimacy in Classical Greek Literature* (Lanham, Md., 2003). Her current work focuses on the language of physical pain and its limitations in Greek epic and tragedy.

Justina Gregory is Professor of Classical Languages and Literatures at Smith College. Her books include a translation of Aesop's *Fables* (1975, with Patrick Gregory), *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (1991), and a commentary on Euripides' *Hecuba* (1999). She is currently working on representations of education in Greek literature.

Mark Griffith is Professor of Classics, and of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies, at the University of California, Berkeley. He has published editions of *Prometheus Bound* and *Antigone* in the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series, as well as a number of articles on Greek tragedy, poetry, and culture.

Michael R. Halleran is Professor of Classics and Divisional Dean of Arts and Humanities in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington. His primary area of scholarship is ancient Greek drama, and he has published

widely on Greek literature and culture, including *Stagecraft in Euripides* (1985), *The Heracles of Euripides: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Interpretative Essay* (1988), *Euripides: Hippolytus, with Translation and Commentary* (1995), and *Euripides' Hippolytus: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Essay* (2001).

Stephen Halliwell is Professor of Greek at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of seven books (including works on Aristophanes, Aristotle, and Plato), of which the most recent is *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (2002), and more than sixty articles on Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and interdisciplinary cultural themes. He is currently working on *Greek Laughter: A Study in Cultural Psychology*. See further at www.st-andrews.ac.uk/classics/staff/halliwell.shtml.

Albert Henrichs is Eliot Professor of Greek Literature at Harvard University. Born and educated in Germany, he received his Dr. phil. and his habilitation from the University of Cologne. He has written extensively on Greek literature, religion, and myth. His major areas of research include the Greek god Dionysus and his modern reception, the representation of ritual in literature and art, the religious self-awareness of the Greeks, and the history of classical scholarship since 1800. He is the author of *Die Götter Griechenlands: Ihr Bild im Wandel der Religionswissenschaft* (1987) and of *Warum soll ich denn tanzen? Dionysisches im Chor der griechischen Tragödie* (1996).

David Kovacs is Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia. He is the editor and translator of Euripides for the Loeb Classical Library. In addition to the six Loeb volumes he has written

three companion volumes discussing textual problems and setting out the ancient evidence for the life of Euripides. He is also the author of two monographs on Euripides and some thirty articles on tragic topics.

Ismene Lada-Richards is a lecturer in Classics at King's College London. She is the author of *Initiating Dionysus: Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford, 1999) and numerous articles on Greek drama in its ritual and performative context. Her current research interests range from post-hellenistic theater and Roman drama to aspects of the classical tradition and the cultural history of the European stage. She is completing a book on pantomime dancing in imperial and late antiquity.

Donald Mastronarde was educated at Amherst College, Oxford University, and the University of Toronto. Since 1973 he has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is now Melpomene Distinguished Professor of Classical Languages and Literature. He has edited Euripides' *Phoenissae* in the Teubner series (1988), produced commentaries on Euripides' *Phoenissae* (Cambridge, 1994) and *Medea* (Cambridge, 2002), and published on other topics in ancient drama.

Judith Mossman is Professor of Classics at the University of Nottingham. She has published a book on Euripides' *Hecuba* and is currently preparing an edition of Euripides' *Medea*. She is also working on a book on women's speech in Greek tragedy.

Vassiliki Panoussi is an assistant professor of Classics at Williams College. Her research focuses on intertextuality, cultural anthropology, and the study of women and gender in antiquity. She is

the author of articles on Vergil, Lucan, and Catullus, and is currently completing a book-length study of Vergil's *Aeneid* and its intertextual and ideological relationship to Greek tragedy.

Christopher Pelling has been Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University since 2003; before that he was McConnell Laing Fellow and Praelector in Classics at University College, Oxford. His books include *Plutarch: Life of Antony* (Cambridge, 1988), *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (Routledge, 2000), and *Plutarch and History* (Duckworth and Classical Press of Wales, 2002); he also edited *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1990) and *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997).

Deborah H. Roberts is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Comparative Literature and Classics at Haverford College. She has published work on Greek tragedy, on Aristotle's *Poetics*, and on the reception and translation of ancient literature. She co-edited (with Don Fowler and Francis M. Dunn) *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature* (Princeton, 1997); her translation of Euripides' *Ion* appeared in the Penn Greek Drama series, edited by David Slavitt and Palmer Bovie (Philadelphia, 1999).

Suzanne Saïd is Professor of Classics at Columbia University. She has written widely on Greek literature and mythology. Her books include *La Faute tragique* (1978), *Sophiste et Tyran ou le problème du Prométhée enchaîné* (1985), *Approches de la mythologie grecque* (1993), *Homère et l'Odyssée* (1998), and (with M. Trédé and A. Le Boulluec) *Histoire de la littérature grecque* (1997). She is the editor of *Hellenismos* (1989), on

Greek identity, and co-editor (with D. Auger) of *Généalogies mythiques* (1998).

Ruth Scodel was educated at Berkeley and Harvard, and has been on the faculty at the University of Michigan since 1984. She is the author of *The Trojan Trilogy of Euripides* (1980), *Sophocles* (1984), *Credible Impossibilities: Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy* (1999), *Listening to Homer* (2002), and articles on Greek literature.

Scott Scullion is Fellow of Worcester College and Faculty Lecturer in Classics, University of Oxford. A native of Toronto with a BA from the University of Toronto and a PhD from Harvard, he has published a book and a number of articles on Greek literature and on Greek religion. He is working on an introductory monograph on Euripides and, with Robert Parker and Simon Price, on a sourcebook of Greek religion.

Bernd Seidensticker is Professor of Greek at the Freie Universität Berlin. He is the author, co-author, or editor of books on Greek and Roman tragedy (*Palintonos Harmonia*, *Das Satyrspiel*, *Die Gesprächsverdichtung in den Tragödien Senecas*) and on the reception of antiquity in contemporary literature.

Jocelyn Penny Small is a Professor II in the Department of Art History at Rutgers University. She has written four books, of which the most recent is *The Parallel Worlds of Classical Art and Text* (2003). Her numerous articles are on a wide range of subjects, including iconography, Etruscan art, memory in antiquity, and database design. She is currently working on optics and illusionism in classical art.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood has been a Junior Research Fellow at

St. Hugh's College, Oxford, University Lecturer at Liverpool University, Senior Research Fellow at University College, Oxford, and Reader at Reading University. She has published many articles and the following books: *Theseus as Son and Stepson* (1979), *Studies in Girls' Transitions* (1988), *"Reading" Greek Culture* (1991), *"Reading" Greek Death* (1995; paperback, 1996), and *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (2003).

Peter Wilson was born and educated in Sydney, Australia, and received his PhD at Cambridge. He held research and teaching posts in Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of Warwick before becoming a Fellow and Tutor in Classics in New College, Oxford, and University Lecturer. He is now Professor of Classics in the Department of Classics and An-

cient History at the University of Sydney. His main research interests and publications are in the area of the Greek theater, especially its history and sociology; early Greek poetry and society more widely; and Greek music.

Paul Woodruff teaches philosophy and classics at the University of Texas at Austin. He has published translations of Euripides' *Bacchae*, and, with Peter Meineck, of Sophocles' Theban plays, as well as an abridged Thucydides translation and versions of several Platonic dialogues, two of them with Alexander Nehamas. He is, as well, the author of several plays and opera libretti. He has written a study of reverence as a classical virtue, and will publish a book on the ideas behind ancient democracy in 2005.

Preface and Acknowledgments

The Greek tragedians are very much alive in the twenty-first century, as is clear from the proliferation of new translations and new productions of the ancient plays. The study of Greek tragedy is also flourishing; two new sub-fields – performance studies and reception studies – have established themselves in the last twenty-five years, a period which has also seen a steady stream of new editions and scholarly studies. This volume aims to reflect the international scope, the variety of approaches, and the lively controversies that characterize the study of Greek tragedy today, even as it provides an orientation to the field. Each chapter is followed by suggestions for further reading, and the combined bibliography at the end of the volume provides additional guidance. In order to accommodate a range of readers, all Greek is transliterated and translated, and titles of plays and other ancient works are given in English, except in a few cases (such as *Eumenides* and *Bacchae*) where there is no satisfactory English equivalent.

This project owes much to many. The contributors not only entertained my suggestions but themselves proved a source of wise counsel; I am particularly grateful to Martin Cropp and Christopher Pelling. At Blackwell, Al Bertrand, Angela Cohen, and Sophie Gibson unfailingly provided advice and encouragement. Thanks to Mary Bellino's meticulousness, ingenuity, and expertise, a volume came into being from many separate files. My student Isabel Köster not only helped with preparing the manuscript, but also won her spurs as a translator. Finally, financial support was provided by the Smith College Committee on Faculty Compensation and Development and by the Loeb Classical Library Foundation.

Abbreviations and Editions

- Addenda*² T. H. Carpenter. *Beazley Addenda: Additional References to ABV, ARV² and Paralipomena*. Second edition. Oxford: 1989.
- ARV² J. D. Beazley. *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*. Second edition. 3 vols. Oxford: 1963.
- CAH 5 D. M. Lewis, J. Boardman, J. K. Davies, and M. Ostwald, eds. *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Vol. 5: *The Fifth Century B.C.* Second edition. Cambridge: 1992.
- DK H. Diels, ed. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Rev. W. Kranz. Sixth edition. 3 vols. Berlin: 1951–52.
- FrGHist F. Jacoby, ed. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. 15 vols. Berlin: 1923–58.
- Gaisford T. Gaisford, ed. *Scriptores Latini Rei Metricae*. Oxford: 1837.
- HKGW F. Nietzsche. *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke*. Ed. H. J. Mette. 5 vols. Munich: 1933–42.
- IG *Inscriptiones Graecae*. Berlin: 1873–.
- Kaibel G. Kaibel, ed. *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Berlin: 1899.
- Keil H. Keil, ed. *Grammatici Latini*. 8 vols. Leipzig: 1855–80. Repr. Hildesheim: 1961.
- KGB F. Nietzsche. *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. 3 vols. Berlin: 1975–.
- KGW F. Nietzsche. *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. 21 vols. Berlin: 1967–.
- KSA F. Nietzsche. *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. Ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. 15 vols. Munich: 1980.
- LCL Loeb Classical Library.
- LIMC *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zurich: 1981–99.
- M-L R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, eds. *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions*. Oxford: 1969.
- OCD S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Third edition. Oxford: 1996.
- Paralipomena* J. D. Beazley. *Paralipomena: Additions to Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters and to Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*. Second edition. Oxford: 1971.

PCG	R. Kassel and C. Austin, eds. <i>Poetae Comici Graeci</i> . 8 vols. Berlin: 1983–.
PMG	D. L. Page, ed. <i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i> . Oxford: 1962.
P.Oxy	<i>Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i> . Oxford: 1898–.
Radermacher	L. Radermacher, ed. <i>Artium Scriptores (Reste der voraristotelischen Rhetorik)</i> . Vienna: 1951.
RE	<i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> . Munich: 1894–1978.
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> . Leiden: 1923–.
TRF	O. Ribbeck, ed. <i>Scenicae Romanorum Poesis Fragmenta</i> . Vol. 1: <i>Tragicorum Romanorum Fragmenta</i> . Third edition. Leipzig: 1897.

All references to fragments of Greek tragedy in this volume follow the numeration of *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen: 1971–2004):

Vol. 1. *Didascaliae Tragicae, Catalogi Tragicorum et Tragoediarum, Testimonia et Fragmenta Tragicorum Minorum*. Ed. B. Snell. 1971.

Vol. 2. *Fragmenta Adespota*. Ed. R. Kannicht and B. Snell. 1981.

Vol. 3. *Aeschylus*. Ed. S. Radt. 1985.

Vol. 4. *Sophocles*. Ed. S. Radt. 1977.

Vol. 5. *Euripides*. Ed. R. Kannicht. 2004.

Editions of Greek works not keyed to an abbreviation or a bibliography entry are those of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae Canon of Greek Authors and Works*, third edition, by Luci Berkowitz and Karl A. Squitier (New York and Oxford: 1990).

PART I

Contexts

CHAPTER ONE

Fifth-Century Athenian History and Tragedy

Paula Debnar

Prologue: 431 BCE

Before dawn on the fourteenth day of Elaphebolion during the final months of the archonship of Pythodorus, residents of Athens and visitors alike made their way to the theater. The usual buzz and stir surrounded the celebration of the City Dionysia. Before the official opening of the festival, the tragic poet Euphorion had previewed his plays about the Titan Prometheus. Euripides, long overdue for a victory, would offer *Medea*, *Philoctetes*, and *Dictys*, followed by the satyr-play *Reapers*.

Not all of the excitement had to do with the festival. Two years earlier (433 BCE) the Athenians had accepted the Corcyraeans into alliance, and in so doing had embroiled themselves in a quarrel with Corinth, Corcyra's mother-city and a powerful member of Sparta's alliance, the Peloponnesian League. The Athenians had hoped that by limiting themselves to a defensive agreement they could avoid direct contact with Corinthian forces, but their plan had misfired. In retaliation the Corinthians sent forces the following year to help the Potidaeans (colonists of theirs but members of Athens' alliance) secede. Then, with Potidaea besieged and their own forces trapped in the city, they had lobbied the Spartans to invade Attica. Early in the fall, a full synod of the Peloponnesian League had voted that the Thirty Years' Peace had been broken and that the league should go to war.

Despite the vote, war with Sparta and her allies was not yet certain. Members of both alliances continued to exchange heralds, and as the Greek world knew, despite their reputation as the world's finest hoplite force – or perhaps because of it – the Spartans were slow to go to war. If Potidaea were to fall soon, war might be avoided; at least the Corinthians could not argue that an invasion of Attica would help their colonists. The Dionysia brought a welcome break from rumors of war.

Euripides won only third prize at the Dionysia of 431; nevertheless, it is tempting to imagine that the crowd leaving the theater that evening spoke mostly of his *Medea*. The audience would have known the story, but most likely did not suspect the magnitude of the crime Medea would commit in Euripides' play. Even so, the poet

had persuaded them to feel sympathy for his protagonist, much as Medea had persuaded the chorus of Corinthian women to keep secret her plan to protect her honor and avenge herself on Jason by murdering her own children. King Aegeus, Medea's friend and ally (*philos*), also succumbed to her persuasion and promised her refuge in Athens, provided she could get to the city on her own (723–24). The king's offer of sanctuary occasions a choral ode in praise of Athens that sits rather oddly in the mouths of the Corinthian women who comprise the chorus. Still, it must have pleased the Athenian spectators to hear their city praised as the birthplace of Harmony (830–34), where "sweet gentle winds breathe upon the land" (838–40).

Within two weeks of the festival, a small band of Thebans invaded Plataea, a Boeotian city allied with Athens. For Thucydides, the invasion marked the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. The historian, however, did not begin his account of the conflict with the attack on Plataea, but with the quarrel between Corinth and her colony Corcyra. This quarrel between *philoí*, cities related by blood, had escalated into a larger conflict between more powerful *philoí*, Athens and Sparta, cities tied by the customary obligations of a treaty of peace. Despite limiting themselves to a defensive alliance with the Corcyraeans, the Athenians had invited the quarrel between Corinth and Corcyra into their own city. As in Euripides' play, honor, revenge, and conflicting obligations – to friendship based on blood ties and friendship based on custom – would all figure prominently in Thucydides' account.

Tragedy and History

Both Thucydides and Euripides may have been present when Corinthians, Corcyraeans, and Athenians debated the proposed alliance. Both are likely to have known about the quarrel that prodded Corcyra, despite a long history of avoiding alliances, to seek Athens' help. And, as we have noted, there is a certain overlap of themes in *Medea* and the first book of Thucydides' history. Yet no one would argue that Thucydides modeled his account of the quarrel between Corinth and Corcyra on Euripides' tragedy or, conversely, that Euripides took inspiration from the quarrel between Corinth and Corcyra. The interrelationships between the two narratives are at once more subtle and more pervasive. To begin with, the questions they raise are not peculiar to them or to 431 BCE. In meetings of the assembly and in the law courts – in other tragedies as well – Athenians will have witnessed debates in which honor competed with expedience and conflicting obligations clashed. Moreover, although Euripides' tragedy ends with its protagonist about to flee from Corinth to Athens, the Corinth of *Medea* is not the Corinth of the fifth century, nor is Athens of the tragedy the Athens of Euripides' audience.

What *is* the relationship between tragedy's mythical past and the fifth-century Athenian audience's present? The goal of this chapter will be to lay the groundwork for answering this question. In order to suggest the range and direction of the movement between past and present in surviving tragedies, I will interleave with a brief overview of fifth-century Athenian history discussions of different facets of the interplay between tragedy and history. These subjects are, of course, more complex, and the scholarly debate much more nuanced, than I can convey in a short survey. Indeed, even the terms "tragedy" and "history" require some preliminary explication.

By “tragedy” I mean simply one of the thirty-two surviving dramas produced by Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides and performed at the dramatic festivals, presumably in Athens (on lost tragedies see Cropp, chapter 17 in this volume). Not all of these tragedies, as it will turn out, lend themselves to a historical approach. “History” is more complicated. In one sense it refers to what Pelling calls “real-world events” (1997b, 213). But “history” does not consist of empirical facts to which poetry responds. Historians as well as tragic poets compose narratives. The narratives of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon provide the basis for our understanding of Athenian history of the fifth century (on sources see Rhodes 1992a, 62–63), but they also reflect their authors’ purposes and bias and are colored by their historical circumstances (as is true of my own historical overview). Nonetheless, as products of the same culture as tragedies, ancient historical narratives are likely to “reflect its categories and concerns, whether psychological, social, or political” (Boedeker 2002, 116, on myth and history).

The tragedies under discussion fall into two broad categories. In the first, the poet alludes directly to fifth-century events or developments, but moves them back into the mythological past. In this category I place Aeschylus’ *Persians* and *Oresteia*. Tragedies in the second group generally avoid overt references to fifth-century events or figures; paradoxically, they also draw the mythological past into the present (see Sourvinou-Inwood, chapter 18 in this volume). The bulk of the plays in this category are by Euripides. Strains of fifth-century Athenian rhetoric, sketches of political types, and reflections of Athens’ institutions and society lend plays of this category a distinctly fifth-century Athenian flavor. The emphasis in Euripides’ *Orestes* on political factions, for example, is directly relevant to the Athens of 408 BCE.

Sophocles contributes to both categories; indeed, one of his tragedies moves in both directions. Although Ajax’s followers resemble fifth-century Athenian rowers more than heroic-age spearmen, the first half of Sophocles’ *Ajax* draws the audience toward the epic past. Following the hero’s suicide, however, the play’s historical motion reverses direction. Sophocles’ Agamemnon and Menelaus, with their meanness and flawed rhetoric, have more in common with what we know of politicians of the second half of the fifth century than with characters in epic or, for that matter, in any of Aeschylus’ extant dramas. Questions raised by *Philoctetes* (409 BCE) concerning the relative power of *nomos* and *physis* (roughly “nurture and nature”) locate it squarely in the midst of a fifth-century sophistic debate. The suspicion of rhetoric *Philoctetes* generates, as well as the conflict in the play between appearance and reality, also project its mythic past into the world of Athenian politics of the final decade of the century.

Sophocles locates *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 BCE; his last tragedy) in the mythological past of Athens under King Theseus. The poet distances the action from contemporary Athens by shifting the setting from the heart of the polis to its outskirts at Colonus. This move, as we will see, allows the tragedy to gesture toward a future that bodes well for Athens.

Athens and the Sea

Of the more than nine hundred tragedies that could have been performed in the fifth century at the City Dionysia alone, only thirty-two have survived. Moreover, these do

not span the entire fifth century, but were composed roughly between the end of the Persian Wars and Athens' defeat by Sparta and her allies (on the fourth-century *Rhesus* see Cropp, chapter 17 in this volume). When Vernant (1988a) speaks of tragedy's "historical moment" and tries to explain why Greek tragedy "is born, flourishes, and degenerates in Athens, and almost within the space of a hundred years" (25), he ignores the role that chance played in preserving the fewer than three dozen plays that have survived (see Kovacs, chapter 24 in this volume).

Tragedy did not end with Athens' defeat in 404, nor did it spring full grown from the head of Aeschylus in democratic Athens following the battles of Salamis and Plataea. The sixth-century tyrant Pisistratus and his sons may very well have set the stage for the political and cultural developments of fifth-century Athens. Nonetheless, the series of conflicts between Greeks and Persians culminating in Persia's defeat in 478 was a cultural as well as historical turning point. Recently discovered fragments of an elegy by Simonides on the battle of Plataea suggest that the feats performed by the Greeks against the Persians quickly became matter for poetry on a level with the heroic deeds of the Trojan War (Boedeker 2001; on Simonides' poem on Salamis see Plutarch, *Themistocles* 15). Tragedy, too, recognized the potential of this theme. An early failed experiment was Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus* (Herodotus 6.21.2). Aeschylus was more successful with *Persians*, whose subject is the battle of Salamis.

Salamis was one of the final engagements of the Persian Wars, but, according to the boast of Athenian speakers in Thucydides (1.74.1), it was the first to show the extent to which "the affairs of the Greeks depended on their ships" – by which they mean Athenian ships. War with Aegina (around 505–491) is said to have forced the Athenians to become seamen (Herodotus 7.144). Athens' shift in military strategy from hoplites to a large state-owned fleet of triremes was unusual, at least for a Greek city. Given the manpower required by triremes (a full complement was 170 rowers per ship), a fleet of these warships was enormously expensive to maintain. Persia, of course, could finance its fleet with tribute from its subjects (Wallinga 1987).

Ancient writers characteristically attribute innovations to a single individual, and the Athenian fleet is no exception. Seven years after the Athenians helped to repel the first Persian assault on Hellas at Marathon, Themistocles advised the Athenians to use the profits of a newly discovered vein of silver at Laurium in southern Attica to expand their fleet for the war against Aegina. While Herodotus (7.144) says merely that the ships were never used against Aegina, Plutarch is more explicit: Themistocles' real motive was to prepare a defense against the Persians (*Themistocles* 4). A leader less shrewd than Themistocles could have anticipated a renewed Persian assault. Only the fortuitous destruction of Darius' ships off the Chalcidic coast (in 492) had saved Athens from the Persian navy. When Xerxes began the excavation of a canal through the peninsula of Mount Athos around 483 (Herodotus 7.22), he made clear his intention to take up where his father left off, to punish the Greeks who had assisted in the rebellion of the king's Ionian subjects (contra, Wallinga 1993, 160–61).

Soon after the final battle at Plataea (479), the Spartans abdicated leadership of the Greek alliance formed to repel the Persians. Thucydides says that the allies wanted the Athenians to assume leadership of the alliance and that the Spartans conceded, in part because they wanted to be done with the war against Persia, in part because they were still friendly toward Athens (1.95–96; cf. Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 23–24). The role that Athenian ships and soldiers played at Salamis and their

willingness to pursue the enemy in the aftermath of that battle made them the likely candidates to assume leadership of an alliance of Greeks, primarily islanders, against Persian aggression.

In Thucydides' condensed (and tendentious) account of the approximately fifty years between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, the so-called Pentecontaetia (1.89–118), Athens methodically expands its power and control over its allies. Other sources tend to support Thucydides' picture. Immediately following the battle of Salamis, for example, Themistocles tried (in vain) to extort money from the island of Andros; he was more successful with Carystus and Paros (Herodotus 8.111–12). Around 476 the Athenians captured Eion and Scyros and sold their inhabitants (non-Greeks) into slavery. Nor was membership in the new alliance, the so-called Delian League, always voluntary. After the capture of Scyros, and not long before Aeschylus produced *Persians*, the Athenians forced the Greek city of Carystus on Euboea to join the league (around 474–72). Soon afterwards (around 471–65) they prevented Naxos from withdrawing from the alliance (Thucydides 1.98). Not all of the cities of Asia Minor may have been eager to exchange Persian for Athenian control (on Phaselis see Plutarch, *Cimon* 12).

The Persian threat may not have been dormant in the 460s. The forces the Athenians defeated at the Eurymedon could have represented an attempt by the Persians to reestablish themselves in the Aegean. Perhaps as late as 465 the Athenians routed Persians from the Chersonese, just before the revolt of another ally, Thasos (Thucydides 100.1–3). Diodorus (11.60) implies that Persian military activity was a response to Athenian aggression, although modern scholars are less certain (e.g., Meiggs 1972, 77–79). By the second half of the 470s, however, the line between offensive and defensive operations had been blurred. The war to save mainland Greeks from Persian aggression was increasingly presented as a war of liberation, protracted in order to extend freedom to the Greeks of Asia Minor (see, e.g., Raaflaub 2004, 58–65, 84–89). Regardless of whether the Athenians were justified in extending their power, by the time that Aeschylus produced *Persians* they had taken the initial moves to transform their alliance into empire.

Aeschylus' *Persians*

The relation of *Persians*, our earliest extant play (472), to history is, at first glance, the least problematic. It is the only surviving tragedy whose focus is a historical event, the defeat of the Persian king Xerxes at Salamis by the Greek fleet a mere eight years before the performance of the play. Aeschylus himself is thought to have been a veteran of Salamis (on the difficulties in extrapolating historical details from *Persians*, see Pelling 1997a). The tragedy is also unusual in that we can directly compare it with a fifth-century historical account of the same engagement (Herodotus 8.40–94). The exercise, however, is more complicated than it may seem. Although Herodotus does not agree with Aeschylus on all points, it is likely that he used *Persians* when composing his own account of Salamis (Saïd 2002b, 137–38). Conversely, although the historical referent of *Persians* is clear, modern scholars' interpretations of the poet's use of the event are shaped in large part by how far they believe the Athenians had moved toward empire by the end of the 470s. Both Herodotus and Thucydides play important roles in conditioning those beliefs.

Whereas Herodotus places Salamis within the context of a number of engagements between Greeks and Persians on land and at sea, Aeschylus conspicuously plays down the importance of land battles. The chorus, comprised of Xerxes' advisors, does refer to the Persian defeat at Marathon (244), but as the audience knows, they are wrong to overlook the importance of Athens' navy. Toward the end of the play the ghost of Darius predicts a Greek victory (on land) at Plataea (816–17), but the battle seems to be an appendage to the defeat of Persia's naval forces (e.g., Podlecki 1966a, 12). From a dramatic perspective, the diminution of the importance of land battles dissociates Darius from Marathon and allows the poet to portray him as an exemplary king, embodying the virtues of moderation and self-control in contrast to the rashness of Xerxes (Pelling 1997a, 10).

Saïd (2002b, 145) may be right to conclude that Herodotus' version of Salamis contains a warning to the Athenians about their own expansionism (more generally, Moles 2002). After all, Herodotus may have been composing his *Histories* well into the 420s or later (Fornara 1971), by which time Athens had firmly established its empire. Some have seen in *Persians* a similar warning (e.g., Rosenbloom 1995). The tragedy's emphasis on sea power seems to point out a parallel between Persia and Athens. The poet's reference to territories that once formed part of the Great King's domain, but which in 472 were part of Athens' alliance (864–906), would seem to highlight the Athenians' inheritance of Xerxes' position. At the very least, in 472 some Athenians – whether supporters or opponents of rule over the allies – may have been wary of the rapid pace and nature of the changes they were witnessing (Raaflaub 1998, 15–19).

The possibility that a reflection of Athens is to be seen in Aeschylus' Persian mirror could explain why the poet asks his audience to look at Salamis through Persian eyes and elicits great sympathy for the Persians, including Xerxes. Reminding us of the compassion that Achilles shows Priam in *Iliad* 24, Pelling (1997a) explains, “[Xerxes'] fate can still capture something of the human condition, and exemplify a human vulnerability which the audience can recognize as their own” (16).

Unlike Xerxes, however, Priam and the Trojans fought to defend their own city, not to conquer Greece. Nor did the Trojan king defy natural boundaries, as Aeschylus implies Xerxes does when he yokes the Hellespont (e.g., 65–71). Even without subscribing to a cultural stereotype of the barbarian East that had been crystallized by the Persian Wars (Hall 1989), many members of Aeschylus' audience had personal reasons to view the Persians with hostility: they would have witnessed the destruction that Xerxes wreaked on their city and lost friends and family in battles against Persian forces. Is it possible, then, that the sympathy the poet elicits for the Persians prompted his audience to imagine their city suffering a fate similar to that of Xerxes? To what extent does Aeschylus draw the recent past into the present – and extend it to a warning about the future?

Because modern readers know the ending of the story of Athenian imperialism and cannot “unread” the narratives of Herodotus or Thucydides, it is difficult to answer this question. There are, however, grounds for caution. That there is only a single passage alluding to Athens' alliance weakens the appeal of a minatory interpretation of the tragedy, as does the play's positive view of Greeks. The messenger reports that the gods saved the city (347). The song he hears at the beginning of the attack is noble: “Sons of Greeks, come, free your land; free your children and wives, and the

temples of your ancestral gods and tombs of your forebears” (402–5). To the queen’s question, “Does Athens remain unsacked?” (348), the messenger’s response, “When [their] men live, [their] defense is secure” (349), echoes what seems to have become an Athenian commonplace after Salamis (e.g., Thucydides 1.74.3). By placing praise in the mouths of enemies, Aeschylus elevates the Athenians and would seem to agree with the boast of Thucydides’ Pericles: “This city alone does not irritate the enemies who attack it, because of the kind of men they are at whose hands they suffer” (2.41.3).

Empire and Democracy

Fourteen years later, when Aeschylus produced his *Oresteia* trilogy, there could be no doubt about the nature of the Athenians’ imperialist goals. Their ambitions came at a cost. Despite the Spartans’ apparent acquiescence to the change in leadership of Greeks, they were far from content with the Athenians’ growing strength and influence. Around 465 the Spartans promised to invade Attica if Thasos rebelled from the Delian League, but were prevented from putting this plan into action by an earthquake and the subsequent threat of a revolt of their helots, state-owned slaves (Thucydides 1.101). The transfer of the treasury of the league may have taken place around this time, given the degree of control Athens was exercising over the Aegean as early as 463: by then all of the islands of the Aegean except the Dorian colonies Thera and Melos were under Athens’ control (e.g., Sealey 1976, 252–53; Robertson 1980, 112–19; contra, Rhodes 1992b, 51).

Growing tension between Athens and Sparta came to a head when the Spartans sent back Athenian forces they had requested to help with the siege of rebellious helots on Mount Ithome (around 462). Thucydides says the Spartans suspected the Athenians of meddling within the Peloponnese and mistrusted them because they were not “of the same tribe” – that is, the Athenians were of the Ionian rather than the Dorian Greek ethnos. According to Plutarch the Spartans thought the Athenians were “revolutionaries” (*Cimon* 17). Deeply insulted, the Athenians broke off the alliance still in effect from the Persian Wars and allied themselves with Sparta’s enemy, Argos. Soon afterwards, Megara defected from the Peloponnesian League and the conflict known as the First Peloponnesian War began (around 462/61).

Plutarch’s explanation for the dismissal of Athenian forces reminds us of the close connection between Athens’ domestic and foreign policies (Rhodes 1992a, 73–75). The complaint about revolutionary tendencies most likely alludes to Ephialtes’ reform of the Areopagus in 462/61 and its consequences. About Ephialtes we know very little (see Aristotle, *Constitution* 25–26; Plutarch, *Cimon* 10, 13, 15–16). His renown rests on his having successfully deprived the aristocratic council of the Areopagus of much of its power and shifted it from the elite to the Athenian people (Rhodes 1992a, 69–72). Soon after expressing his opposition to these reforms Cimon, who had urged the Athenians to cooperate with Sparta, was ostracized (Plutarch, *Cimon* 17). Quarrels triggered by the reforms are believed to have been responsible for the murder of Ephialtes in the following year. Athens, it would seem, was on the brink of civil war.

Extended military campaigns abroad concurrent with the war against the Peloponnesians may have exacerbated political discontent in Athens. In 460 the Athenians

tried to increase their power at Persia's expense by sending a large fleet to help Egypt rebel from the Great King. The expedition dragged on for six years before its disastrous end: the Athenians and their allies lost 250 ships (Thucydides 1.109–10). Thucydides says that only a few men survived (1.110.1; cf. Diodorus 11.77). Based on epigraphic evidence (M-L 33; *SEG* xxxiv 45), Lewis estimates that Athenian casualties in 459 alone “ran well into four figures” (Lewis 1992a, 113 n. 57). In addition, in 458 the Athenians turned westward, forming an alliance with Eggesta in Sicily (*IG* I³ 11; Rhodes 1992b, 53). At around the same time the Athenians began construction of the long walls. Once complete, the walls would transform Athens into a quasi-island, allowing the city to rely on its fleet to defend its harbor and guarantee the imports necessary to survive extended attacks by land. The Spartans and their Athenian sympathizers understood the implications of the project. According to Thucydides, “Some Athenians were secretly trying to bring in [Peloponnesian troops then in Boeotia] with the hope of checking the rule of the people and the building of the long walls” (1.107.4).

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

The conflicts and resolution of the *Oresteia* are strongly colored by the difficulties the Athenians were facing in the 450s: clashes with the Persians, the First Peloponnesian War, and political upheavals within their own city. An outstanding feature of *Agamemnon* is the poet's use of naval power and protracted warfare conducted in distant lands as a metaphor for a perversion of natural order and a threat to the political stability in Argos. Unlike Homer's Agamemnon, Aeschylus' king is called “the elder leader of Achaean ships” (184–85) and “commander of ships” (1227). Agamemnon wonders how he can become “a deserter of the fleet” (212), and the chorus refers to the corrupt sacrifice of Iphigenia as the “preliminary sacrifice for ships” (227). The expedition acquires additional negative connotations when Ares, god of war, is called the “gold-changer of bodies” (438) and the long siege in distant Troy generates political problems at home (Rosenbloom 1995, 97–98, 105–11).

Eumenides finally brings an end to the ancient cycle of violence we see continued in *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*. As the trilogy moves from Argos, in the first two plays, to Delphi and Athens in *Eumenides*, so too it moves historically from the earliest generations of the house of Atreus to the trial of Orestes on the Acropolis, where the mythical past borders on the audience's present. But the Acropolis is not the only backdrop shared by *Eumenides* and its fifth-century audience.

The extraordinary topicality of *Eumenides* is undisputed (e.g., Podlecki 1966a, 74–100); for example, despite differences in details, the alliance Orestes promises the Athenians (762–74) alludes to Athens' treaty with Argos in 462. It is equally certain that when Athena gives the jury of Athenian citizens the power to try cases of murder, the poet alludes to Ephialtes' reform of the Areopagus, which still retained this power in 458. In response to the Erinyes' threat to bring civil war in retaliation for Athena's decision to free Orestes, the goddess pleads with them not “to fix among my citizens war against kin, furious battle against one another” (862–63). She asks instead for war against external enemies (864). Once appeased the Erinyes – soon to be the Semnai (“Reverend Goddesses”) – pray for the city to be free of civil war (976–87). Macleod cautions that “to pray for a city that it should be free of faction is