Literacy, Tyranny, and the Invention of Greek Tragedy

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The invention of Greek tragedy has been explained as a natural evolution from dithyrambs, Dionysian rituals, or cults of the dead. These evolutionary ideas have received deserved criticism from Gerald Else; but his own theory makes tragedy the invention of two theatrical geniuses (Thespis and Aeschylus), which seems like a rare stroke of luck. Neither evolution nor genius explains what made this innovation necessary, how it was possible, and why it was accepted. These riddles concern tragedy's social circumstances. Two upheavals mark the sixth century, the period when tragedy arose. One resulted in tyrannies (and later, democracies), the other in widespread literacy. I believe that these changes in political-economy and communication conditioned the development of tragedy. Together, they created a need for a new cultural institution. In the midst of these shifts Athens occupied a special position, and became the only city able to fill that new need by inventing tragedy.

My argument for the development of Greek tragedy thus has two strands. The first addresses Greece's political and economic structure. Before the sixth century Greece was an almost entirely agricultural society. By and large such civilizations do not add or overturn structures of social organization with great suddenness or frequency. Hence an unprecedented institution like tragedy indicates some kind of major social shift. During the sixth century, political and economic trouble shook apart the aristocrats' rule; tyrants were the result. They were eventually ousted and replaced by oligarchies, revived aristocracies, or occasionally, as in Athens, by democratic regimes (Fine 131-34). Athens' tyrant found that tragedy suited his political goals, and later the new genre served the interests of Athens' democracy and empire as well. Tragedy's public functions explain why it was an open, civic, state-supported spectacle, unlike the private Senecan drama, or the contemporary commercial theater.

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Athens' tyrant gained political support by promoting the interests of the merchants and artisans. These people needed writing as well as speech to go about their business. When Athenians shifted away from agriculture, they also moved away from oral culture. In the second strand of my argument, I show that the need and resources for a specifically cultural innovation (which became tragedy) arose out of the transition from orality to literacy, and in the effects that these two modes of communication have upon structures of consciousness. The Greek alphabet was devised sometime around the end of the ninth century, and became widespread by the fifth century (Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 180-81, 261-62). In the late sixth century, reading and writing were beginning to displace oral culture. Many aspects of tragedy result from the collision between orality and literacy.

From Politics to Plays

Greece's economic and political structure made tragedy possible.[1] In Mycenaean times (fifteenth through thirteenth centuries) Greece was controlled by state theocratic bureaucracies, as were Egypt, Persia, and other civilizations in the Mediterranean and Near East (Finley 28-29; Austin and Vidal-Naquet 36). But disturbances in the twelfth and eleventh centuries scrambled Greece's social structures. A new pattern of land ownership emerged, in which Greek land was owned by individuals or extended families ("tribes"). The economy, of course, remained overwhelmingly agricultural. In some areas the villages eventually banded together to form a *polis*, combining agricultural lands with an urban center (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 50; Finley 123; Hammond 97-98). Compared to most other peoples in the region, the "decentralization" of land ownership gave the Greeks greater political and economic independence, and weaker local monarchies (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 57-58; Hammond 72-86).[2]

During the seventh and sixth centuries, most of the *poleis* were struggling through social conflicts, which usually involved demands for land redistribution. These conflicts were primarily the result of relative overpopulation, but the rise of increasingly wealthy merchants and manufacturers also seems to have unsettled the traditional, agrarian basis of power. Across Greece, tyrants overthrew many of the old aristocratic oligarchies to carry out the demands of the lower and especially middle classes (or at least to provide political stability) (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 53-56, 58-60, 70; Hammond 145-46; Fine 104-08; Lintott 34-37, 43; Thucydides 43; Jaeger 224-26). In an effort to avert tyranny, the Athenians installed Solon as archon during the years 594-91 to mediate changes in the system by legal means. Eschewing land redistribution, he chose instead to institute debt relief and eliminate the possibility of citizens becoming slaves (Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 46-53; Austin and Vidal-Naquet 71, 214-15; Hammond 157-59; Fine 197-99; Lintott 43-47). He also promoted a diversification of the Athenian economy through measures that encouraged commerce and artisan manufacture. He may have obligated citizens to teach

their sons a trade and offered citizenship to foreign artisans; and his constitution included landless laborers as citizens. Hence it became possible to be a citizen through labor and trade as well as through land ownership, since the requirement of tribal membership was weakened. The poor became less dependent on the wealthy (Aristotle, *Ath. Const.* 48; Hammond 159-61; Fine 199-200, 203-08, 218; Lintott 46; but cf. Austin and Vidal-Naquet 212-13). (The admission of peasants into the governmental structures is probably the chief reason Attica had few peasant rebellions. See Austin and Vidal-Naquet 25; Lintott 46-47.) Further, Solon trimmed the aristocracy's hold on power, expanded the role of the Assembly and included within it a judicial body in which citizens conducted their own prosecution or defense. These were the first steps through which Athens slowly dismantled the tribal system underlying the oligarchic aristocracies, and placed the state's claims above those of the tribes (Aristotle, *Ath. Const.* 50-53; Hammond 161-63, 165-66; Fine 202-08). However, since the rights and economic survival of the poor were now protected, large landowners, manufacturers and others in the growing urban economy required more and more laborers who would not have economic or political means of independence: that is, they needed slaves. The line dividing citizen and non-citizen became sharper (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 72; Finley 70-71).

Despite his hopes, Solon did not prevent tyranny from arising in Athens: in 546 Pisistratus (on his third attempt) attained enduring power. Pisistratus respected the Solonic constitution in form, but held power behind the scenes, achieving a period of relative political stability. Though he did not make major changes in the political institutions, Pisistratus (like Solon) aided the interests of the rising artisans and merchants both economically and politically, and attracted talented refugees--among them, artists and poets from Ionia, where Persia had overrun the Greeks. He paid special attention to public works, religion and festivals. This is crucial: it means that he anchored his power by building the importance of the state (which he controlled) over the tribes (which the aristocracy controlled), and by obtaining popular support (even if Athenians chafed under imposed rule). Such actions were typical of sixth-century tyrants. Among his most important acts, in 534 Pisistratus introduced a new contest, at a civic event which he also invented or reorganized: tragedy, at the annual City Dionysia (Aristotle, *Ath. Const.* 56-59; Hammond 150, 164-65, 179-83; Fine 131-34, 210-20; Lintott 48-50).

Pisistratus's innovation probably served his political needs nicely, both locally and throughout Greece. It provided him with a unique showpiece which flaunted Athens' talents. It invoked Dionysus, the god of the people, and in so doing moved the populace away from aristocratic rituals; but the City Dionysia was placed under a secular authority that Pisistratus could control. And unlike most other festivals, the City Dionysia was open to foreigners and occurred at the opening of the shipping season when many visitors were likely to attend, so that Athens might build a new regional reputation (Parke 128-

30; Hammond 182; Else 48-50). Such use of performance is not historically unique. The pageants, masques, ballets, intermezzi, tournaments and the like that were employed by the (often absolutist) monarchies of Renaissance Europe stand as parallel examples of state spectacle and its political efficacy.[3]

But even after Pisistratus died some six or seven years after the tragedic contests began, and even after his son Hippias was deposed in 510, tragedy remained popular. Performance competition in general had caught the public imagination: the democratic government emerging under Cleisthenes added dithyrambic contests to the City Dionysia around 509, satyr plays perhaps ten years later, and comedy in 486. The festivals were "popular" in a different way as well: the audience behaved much as popular audiences have throughout theater history, with an enthusiasm for noisy approval and disapproval, snacks, whole-hearted emotional involvement and top-notch shows. Extreme misbehavior may have occurred, for at one point the Athenian Assembly saw fit to make it punishable by death (Parke 129, 134-35; Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* 72, 82, 124-25, 272-78). Decorum does not seem to have been the byword of tragic theater. Aeschylus himself displays rather questionable taste, as witness (for example) the priestess who crawls out on her hands and knees at the beginning of *Eumenides*.

Tragedy's value to its community can be seen in its economic underpinnings, all of which assume urbanization. I believe Pisistratus most likely paid for the tragic contests out of state funds. He imposed a ten percent tax on produce and probably on imports and exports as well. His sons cut this rate to five percent; such was the level of wealth they had available (Hammond 180, 182). After their time, taxes on trade continued (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 122-24). More significantly, paying for tragic choruses became one of the chief public services (*leitourgiai*, "liturgies"), which Athens' wealthy residents, whether citizen or foreigner, were both required and honored to perform: required, because it was the best way to get things done; honored, because of the religious and competitive elements involved, allowing the rich to show off their public spirit. One reads of citizens boasting about how much they had spent as *choregos*. (One of the other possible "liturgies" was to equip a battleship.) Quite probably there were aspects of "conspicuous consumption" here, and even political points to be scored (Finley 150-52; Austin and Vidal-Naquet 100, 121-22; Else 56). Since paying for a chorus was a public service, Athenians most likely felt that tragedy greatly contributed to the vitality of their democratic order; certainly many of the plays treated matters of community policy, accomplishment and ethics. In addition, theater tickets were not free. As the price was rather steep, eventually a "theoric fund" was created to subsidize tickets for the poor (supposedly, even the rich occasionally used it). This probably happened under Pericles sometime between 450 and 425 (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 266-68). The theoric fund also suggests the importance of theater to the democracy. By then Athens had developed an empire and much of its revenue came from tributes paid by other *poleis*

(Austin and Vidal-Naquet 125-28). It is worth noting that the tribute payments were displayed at the theater at the beginning of the City Dionysia (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 58-59): the theatrical festival had become a symbol of Athens' wealth, power and vitality, and so was the most suitable venue for further displays of the city's ascendancy.

In these ways we can see how tragedy was instituted to help build popular support for the state, and became popular in its own right. A major source of public and financial support (for both the festival and the state) were the merchants and artisans who were slowly becoming an ever-greater part of Athenian life.

From Alphabet to Actor

I have described the political rationale behind Pisistratus' introduction of tragedy to the state-sponsored Dionysia. But why an innovation like this? This question brings up the second strand of my argument: cultural forms and ideas are, to a significant degree, shaped by the dominant mode of communication. Greek culture had always been oral. The knowledge, beliefs, values and traditions that Greece had garnered over the centuries were all transmitted orally. Speech was the Greeks' medium for both education and linguistic art, which were combined in an exemplary fashion by the epics of Homer. "Education" and "art" are weak translations, for in ancient Greece, these activities were conjoined and had enormous centrality, undoubtedly due to the way they (like economics) merged with political life: "enculturation," or the Greek word *paideia*, might better indicate the total process of maintaining the values and heritage of Greece. The epics, sung by minstrels who travelled from city to city, were at the heart of *paideia* (Havelock, *Preface to Plato* 47). The invention of tragedy, then, posed a kind of alternative to the traditional *paideia*.

From the mid-eighth century to the early sixth century, Athens apparently was a cultural backwater: bards seldom visited, nor are any known to have been born there (Else 46-47). Then, sometime during the sixth century, competitions in the rhapsodic performance of Homer's epics were added to the Panathenaia. (The festival, held every four years, may have begun in 566.) Like tragedy, the rhapsodic contest was unknown at other major festivals in Greece. Possibly it was Pisistratus who inserted the rhapsodic competition into the Panathenaia, and perhaps Pisistratus who brought the Homeric texts to Athens for safekeeping and redaction (Parke 34).[4] If so, then his was a major campaign to make Athens the leading light within Greek culture. However, competitively or not, Homer's poems had been sung for centuries; why was this newcomer, tragedy, moving in?

It seems that by this time the rhapsodic tradition was decaying or at a crisis in its development; after all, life in Greece had changed considerably since the twelfth century, the time of the Trojan War (Else 67-68). In addition,

alphabetic writing had developed in Greece probably in the ninth or eighth century, and its influence was slowly spreading. Greek culture was the first in the world in which the general public, not just a scribal or elite caste, became literate (Havelock, *Preface* 49 n4, and *Lit. Rev.* 180-181).[5] So with the rise of literacy and the decline of Homeric performance, Athenians probably felt an increasing need for a *paideia* with a new mode of transmission. The new cultural form, tragedy, was intimately involved with the rise of writing in Greece.

Today, we think and dramatize in a manner that is indelibly marked by literacy. But the Athenians of pre-classical times did not: as I've pointed out, up through the seventh century their culture had been predominantly oral. As I will show, during the late sixth and early fifth centuries, they decisively shifted from orality to literacy. Tragedy not only arose during the transition from orality to literacy, but further, it was the main art form in which these two modes converged, combined, collided. This transition affected the way the poets composed drama, and they could not have composed the tragedies as we know them unless they had first become literate.[6] To demonstrate the role of literacy in the formation of tragedy, I will first consider the history of literacy's introduction and spread in Greece, and then look at its influence on verbal art.

Before alphabetic writing was invented, there were syllabic and pictographic scripts. These earlier forms are notable for the number of symbols required to represent words or speech sounds. Because there were so many symbols to learn, learning was difficult and restricted to a narrow minority consisting of scribes, clerics, or aristocrats (Ong 85-93). Syllabaries, pictograms and the like made sense for the large bureaucracies that typified theocratic, despotic states such as in Egypt and Persia: these aristocracies had an interest in constraining the spread of knowledge (since knowledge, then as now, can confer power directly or inspire efforts to obtain power), and an interest in preventing laws from taking an objective, public form to which subordinates might appeal. In fact, Greek itself was written with a syllabary (Linear B) during Mycenaean days, when Greece was most like these other lands (Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 117, 129 n6; Finley 214 n39).

The Phoenicians developed the more-or-less phonetic writing that served as a prototype for the alphabet (Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 63-70, 89-90). Phoenician script, like Hebrew and Arabic, did not have separate signs for vowels. The Greek alphabet introduced vowel signs, largely because its words often began with vowels or contained combinations of sounds that the Phoenician script could not represent. The representation of vowels made Greek script more explicit (able to write words unambiguously) and more flexible (able to transcribe words in other languages). It presented both a small number of symbols and a relatively simple, usually one-to-one relationship between inscription and phoneme, and so it was clearer and easier to learn than any previous form of writing (Ong 85-92).

The Phoenicians were a trading people, and their commerce took them throughout the Mediterranean world; yet only the Greeks adopted their kind of writing. I would suggest that in the eighth century only Greece had an economic and political structure that made alphabetic writing advantageous. As I showed above, Greece then had a decentralized economy, that was becoming ever more involved with commerce and manufacture--trades that utilize writing for orders, inventory, accounting, loans, insurance, and contracts. The merchants and artisans involved in such pursuits would naturally prefer a form of writing that was comparatively easy to learn, and according to Eric Havelock, they were indeed the first to use alphabetic writing, along with the scribes; the upper and lower classes became literate rather later (*Lit. Rev.* 187-89, 201). Writing was also important for legislation and litigation, both of which would become more vital as Athens' democracy and population grew (Fine 415-29). Not only did Pisistratus's political and economic policies appeal to the merchants and artisans, but his cultural program did as well.

My theory that writing had a deep connection to the establishment of tragedy depends on evidence that writing was prevalent enough to have had such effects by the end of the sixth century. Because direct evidence is thin, inferential arguments must do.[7] Of course, we need not conflate the influence of writing on a society with the influence of writing on individuals. What is crucial is the effect of writing on those who used it and on the poetic compositions that they devised, and whether those effects could be communicated to the public at large. Nevertheless, the extent of literacy within Athens at large is relevant, because it is on that basis that the audience would understand, accept, and even desire certain nuances of difference between dramatic and wholly oral epic performance.

For the sixth century, we have only a few pointers to judge by. We know that Solon wrote poetry, and probably his constitution (Aristotle, *Ath. Const.* 48; Fine 200). It appears that Thespis wrote his *tragôidia* (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb Tragedy and Comedy* 70-71). The rhapsodic competitions instituted at the Panathenaia were based on a written version of the Homeric epics (Else 47). And apparently, laws began to be written in the sixth century at the insistence of the middle (and possibly lower) classes, in order to wrest the laws from the wisdom or whim of the aristocracy and give them a fixed and public form (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 52, 56-57; Fine 101-04; Jaeger 102). This codification implies that by this time there was wide knowledge of writing, or at least knowledge of its significance.

Evidence for the fifth century is better, but still far from indisputable. Havelock asserts that literacy didn't become widespread until the last third of the fifth century. In support of this late dating, he marshals evidence from ballots cast for ostracism, Aristophanes' *Frogs* and other plays, and so forth (*Preface* 39-41, 52-56; *Lit. Rev.* 190-205, 286-90). However, Havelock's extremely late dating may be a little drastic. The word *biblion* in Aristophanes (91, 108), which Havelock translates as "document" (a sheet), is often read as

"book" (a long scroll): Aristophanes could have had either length in mind. Aristophanes' aspersions on documents and scribes, which Havelock considers evidence that Athenians were not yet comfortable with or supportive of writing, could show that they were familiar enough with scribes to be fed up (Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 286-90; *Preface* 55 n16). Likewise, suspicion of lawyers does not necessarily imply distrust of law itself; and it is worth recalling that laws were originally written down to satisfy popular demands. (One might compare this with Aristophanes' attacks on Euripides, to whom he was nonetheless indebted.)[8] In Plato's *Symposium* Eryximachus quotes Phaedrus's observation that books had been written on the usefulness of salt and on Heracles and other gods, but none had been written on Love (40). This dialogue was written in the early fourth century but is set in 416 (Plato 9). Moses Hadas has collected half a dozen other such examples (19-21). These remarks suggest that a fairly substantial literature had developed in Athens by the late fifth century. Thucydides tells of a Thracian army's attack upon a village called Mycalessus in Boeotia, which occurred just after the boys had entered their school (Thucydides 495-96). This happened in 413, but the location is very interesting: this school was clearly in a backwater, so if education had advanced to such formality there, its urban predecessors must have been well ahead. The advance of literacy may have been expedited by Solon's reforms at the beginning of the sixth century: if he did require every citizen to teach his son a trade, and if the trades were the first to utilize alphabetic writing extensively, there should have been a great pressure on all to learn writing. It seems that various classes did learn to write, given that Aeschylus was an aristocrat, Sophocles came from a manufacturing family, and Euripides' family were farmers (Jaeger 237, 240). This is a startling range of social origins, and (I will contend) all three dramatists could write. My own estimate, then, is that literacy became common in Athens during the early or mid fifth century.

Walter J. Ong finds that many of the differences between orality and literacy arise from the fact that speech is aural, whereas writing (that is, phonetic writing, the alphabet) maps sound into a visual form (71-74, 117-23). Surveying the theory and research on orality and literacy, Ong describes how in orality, thought is fixed and made memorable through formulaic structures: verse, proverbs, epithets and other regular patterns of speech and thought (33-36). Oral forms pay little attention to strict chronological sequence or causal necessity; rhapsodists recall epic episodes according to their associations or their sense of the audience, and storytellers tend to use formulaic patterns of action (141-47). The concept of time and causation implicit in oral culture is multiple, patterned, or simultaneous: for example, the ancestors coexist with the living in the present (97-98, 136). Speech readily engages its social and practical context, and it fosters a communal and interactive sensibility; an individual character appears externalized or "flat," having little or no internal development (37-38, 69-71, 151-55).

Literacy organizes thought very differently. Since writing is a visual medium, seeing becomes more crucial for knowledge than listening. But as Havelock points out, the dominance of vision develops in a particular way. In orality, a speaker uses language to create "visual" images in the listener's imagination. (I might add that visual images in oral culture are usually iconographic and require verbal exegesis.) In contrast, literacy uses visual material to store knowledge, which decreases the need for mental visualization (*Preface* 189): it promotes observation and display over imagination. Ong adds that in translating words into visual symbols, writing requires the organization of thought into spatial sequences--that is, linearization (39-40, 100). Thus it implicitly promotes a linear, spatialized concept of time and causation (76, 141-51). Further traits of literate culture stem from the isolation it requires: in order to read or write, one must separate oneself from the rest of the world, a condition that permits "objectivity" and introspection (Ong 45-46, 54, 69, 101, 105). Writing itself often seems autonomous or decontextualized: largely because it lacks the intonations, gestures, dialogues and direct audience engagement of speech, "Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known" (Ong 43-44, and see 41-42). Writing contributes to these abstracting tendencies in a phenomenological way as well, since "Sight isolates, sound incorporates" (Ong 72). Finally, since words are fixed in a visual rather than aural form, there is little need for formula: prosaic language, precision, and personal idiom can flourish (Ong 103-07).[9]

We can see how literacy affected the tragedies at many levels.[10] To begin with, consider the "verbal" (as opposed to the "theatrical") aspects of tragedy. The plays use meter, as do the orally composed epics; but they use iambic trimeters instead of the epic dactylic hexameter (and only occasionally the "danceable" trochaic tetrameter), since "iambic is the most speech-like of verses" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 23; and see his *Rhetoric* 180, and Else 61). The dramatists' diction is also distinguishable from the formulaic patterns of oral culture. Oral composition is formulaic, and necessarily so in order to make speech stay in memory. The rhapsodes utilized a fund of well-worn phrases, epithets, and speech patterns to which they could make slight alterations and add unique material as needed: their compositional method is one of "theme and variations" (Russo 44). Oral composition also tends to preserve archaisms in formula (Ong 47). But in certain key respects, the playwrights broke with these habits. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* is riddled with strange, often grotesque twists of phrase and image, weird enough for even Aristophanes to travesty (Aristophanes 77-80; see also Hadas 180). And Aristophanes also ribs Euripides about his fluid, "natural" speech (Aristophanes 80-83).

These traits of rhythm and diction, particularly as they appear in Euripides, are related to growing literacy (Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 283-92). Aristotle comments that in tragedy, "Just as iambics were adopted, instead of

tetrameters, because they are the most prose-like of all meters, so tragedy has given up all those words, not used in ordinary talk, which decorated the early drama and are still used by the writers of hexameter poems" (*Rhetoric* 166). Likewise, there was a movement away from Latin and toward vernacular following the similar expansion of literacy in the late Middle Ages. The verbal and dramatic grotesquery that we see in Aeschylus is symptomatic of transitions in orality and literacy: witness its appearance in Gothic art, Rabelais, and so forth (McLuhan 266-67). I would suggest that Aeschylus was especially wrenched by the shift from orality to literacy, which the later writers were somewhat beyond. A turn from formalized to everyday speech, prosy and vernacular, is characteristic of verbal art in increasingly literate societies; so too, somewhat paradoxically, is the expansion of vocabulary (Ong 103-08). The reason may be that alphabetic writing, which is easily learned, puts knowledge in the hands of the general public; it also allows one to choose words more sensitively.[11]

Havelock has emphasized the way in which major speeches in the plays are constructed in an oral manner, utilizing formulaic material (*Lit. Rev.* 299-308). However, the diction and rhythm of the playwrights' work appear to reveal significant movements away from orality and toward literacy. For this reason it seems to me impossible that they could have arrived at the literary style they chose without being writers.[12]

Literacy affects narrative structure as well as rhythm and diction. Tragic plots tell a single story, in a step-by-step fashion. This pattern is unlike those found in the oral arts of storytelling and Homeric epic. The epics interweave several stories, launch into digressions, jump backward and forward, and so on. Storytelling uses a single narrative, but generally it has a narrow repertory of plot structures with a particular rhythm and a "non-logical" organization, such as the ritual use of three incidents (Ong 141-47; Hawkes 67-79, 90-95). But the Greek dramas look very little like either of these. Their plots focus on a single crisis and can be described as a pyramid of rising and falling action, in which one action sets up the next, through a linear sequence of causes and effects. That pyramidal structure is directly related to the linear notions that belong to literacy (Ong 141-42). Its implicit concept of time is linear and continuous. In contrast, epic (or mythic) time is set in an indeterminate past and wanders freely back and forth according to its own inner rhythm, like memory: it is non-linear and discontinuous. However, in the total structure of the dramatic performance, the two kinds of time are fused: the tragic, linear plot joins with the epic, non-linear choruses (Romilly 5-31). This is another way in which orality and literacy were amalgamated to form tragedy.

The characters in epic and storytelling tend to be simple, stereotypical, "flat." But as Ong puts it,

> The first approximations we have of the round character are in the
> Greek tragedies, the first verbal genre controlled entirely by writing.

These deal still with essentially public leaders rather than the ordinary, domestic characters that can flourish in the novel, but Sophocles' Oedipus and, even more, Pentheus and Agave and Iphegenia and Orestes in Euripides' tragedies are incomparably more complex and interiorly anguished than any of Homer's characters. In orality-literacy perspectives, what we are dealing with here is the increasing interiorization of the world opened up by writing. (152)

Turning now to the more theatrical aspects of tragedy, we need once again to consider the conjunction of actor and chorus. Else is certainly correct that Greek tragedy "is committed to a special kind of double vision: the hero's view of himself and the chorus's view of him" (44). He defines this duality as the bind and tension between leader and ordinary citizen (61, 65-66, 76). But underlying this double vision are the concepts of perspective and focus. These are formed through the rise of visual dominance and discrete individuality, which themselves were fostered by increasing literacy. The tragic focus is typically on the leader, not the chorus. Literacy creates a sense of personal depth and complexity that was largely unknown in oral society; and very likely, literate individuals were seen and saw themselves as both valuable and disturbing to the traditional community. The combination of chorus and actor marked in a symbolic form the concurrence of (and transition between) the collectivist oral culture and the individualizing manuscript culture. As the latter grew, the number of actors increased from one, to two, to three; the emphasis shifted from plot to character; and contests for actors were added to the City Dionysia in the mid-fifth century. Simultaneously, the chorus took a smaller and smaller part in the plays (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 232-34).[13] Even under Aeschylus the chorus was showing signs of strain: in *Agamemnon* he has a long passage (the longest among the extant tragedies) in which the chorus is broken up and each member assigned a separate speech.[14]

Rules regarding the restaging of plays began to be introduced in the mid-fifth century. Until Aeschylus' death, all tragedies produced at the City Dionysia were new. After he died (in 456) his plays alone could be remounted at the City Dionysia; no other old plays were restaged there until the fourth century. (However, plays were restaged at the Lenaia and the Rural Dionysia.) At that time, when plays were remounted (and the only old playwrights allowed were our Big Three) actors would constantly take such liberties that eventually a law had to be passed to require use of the original words (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 99-100). What do these rules mean? An emphasis on original work would seem, on the face of it, more characteristic of the individualistic culture that followed the Renaissance. But by and large Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides produced "original" variants of mythic and epic themes, rather than new themes. Oral culture promotes

the "recycling" of linguistic material, without any sense of copyright: the fourth-century law battles against such recycling. Perhaps the Greeks were developing a concept of individual intellectual property and creating a new, text-based tradition; that is, they may have been forming more fixed concepts of original and origin, of new and old, that lacked the fluid attitude held under orality. The law also presupposes some kind of authorized and readily available version of the scripts. These may have existed: Aristotle mentions that by his time, there were plays that were written to be read (*Rhetoric* 197). If there was such an authorized script, that may imply that when the plays were first written, they were wholly (or at least predominantly) the words of one man, and improvisational workshops or actors' suggestions were largely irrelevant. In any case, the shift in attitude from the seventh century's oral tradition is striking.

The deepest relationship between writing and theater lies in their semiotic structures (at least as this was understood by the Greeks). The written word is a sign for a spoken word, which is a sign for a concept: writing is a system of signs of signs.[15] Acting too is a structure of signs of signs, for actors produce words and actions, and these signs in turn become signs of the characters. Further, all things and actions in theater tend to become signs (if not signs of signs, then signs of themselves), to the point that audiences may mistake actual injuries for part of the performance (Veltrusky 565-67). Clearly, bits of acting were involved in the rhapsodic performance of epic, but as Aristotle points out, this is a mixed mode of imitation (*Poetics* 18). In theater, as in writing, there is a fundamental and inescapable doubling movement that creates signs of signs and replaces every real thing with an image of itself. Indeed, proponents of religious origins of theater must explain the semiotic sanction that permits the re-enactment of sacred ritual. The dangers of blasphemy were quite real, as Aeschylus could tell us, having been brought to trial on the charge of revealing the Mysteries in a play (Hadas 177-78). This sanction probably arrived through the generalized recognition of theatrical performance as signs of signs, so that a re-enactment was understood as merely a sign, not the thing itself.[16] But theater was a rare event: the only manner in which such a recognition could be generalized was through literacy. Not even hearsay acquaintance with literate ideas would do the trick: according to evidence reviewed by Ong, "Writing has to be personally interiorized to affect thinking processes" (56).[17]

Writing and theater double each other in another sense as well. In the course of considering Plato's internalization of writing and the resulting concepts of knowledge and existence, Havelock observes that abstracted objects of knowledge (Platonic "Forms") do not change, and so all statements about them are timeless: "Their syntax excludes tenses of the verb 'to be'" (*Preface* 226). Such statements are always in present tense, like this one. So too is theater in performance always *now*. If the democratic side of alphabetic writing leads to the vernacular, its solipsistic *cogito* leads to abstractions like

the Platonic Forms; and perhaps in a similar manner we can perceive the doubling and bifurcation of theater into a popular entertainment, and a performative discourse on human universals.[18]

Did writing cause theater? If by "cause" we mean linear, mechanical causation, as in "I move this chair," then probably not. But if we can speak of structural causality, then I would suggest that writing constructed a conceptual space for theatrical performance, giving it a centrality and proliferation that it could not otherwise have achieved; and this conceptual space has remained, even in theater's filmed and televised permutations, throughout the career of generalized literacy.

From Thespis to Theory

If tragedy were instituted as both a political showpiece and a means of protecting Athens' Hellenic heritage (the two aspects support each other), that would seem to explain several things. Else rightly emphasizes the local issues:

> His [Pisistratus'] motive for supporting tragedy must have been at least to some extent pedagogical: he wanted tragedy to stand forth as the educator of his people, as Homer did at the Panathenaia. And perhaps we can conjecture that he had an even more specific idea in mind: tragedy, along with Homer, as an instrument for the *rapprochement* of the classes, an emotional unification of all Athenians in a common sympathy for fallen greatness. (77)

In order to fulfill the particular political roles it was assigned, tragedy would have to be a major public event, rather than an elite amusement for the upper classes or an informal entertainment at the marketplace or in the fields. In addition, despite being performed at an event honoring Dionysus, tragedy had to be serious, not humorous or bawdy, since like the epic source material that dominated the plays themselves, tragedy's motive was the inculcation of the Greek *paideia*.[19] At the same time, having tragedy at the Festival of Dionysus made political sense, since Dionysus was a god of the people; as observed above, like other sixth-century tyrants Pisistratus anchored his power by providing benefits for the lower and middle classes.

But we cannot exclude from the political goal the need to find a substitute for rhapsodic *paideia*, which was straining under the ancientness of the songs and the change in consciousness inaugurated by rising literacy. Merely composing new songs would not do the job: another genre had to be developed which would meet the new mentality, and that mentality was being nourished by the merchants and artisan manufacturers upon whom Pisistratus and the democracy depended. As I have suggested, Else's theory of two great geniuses does not adequately explain why tragedy was invented or why it took the form it did. The playwrights worked with particular political and cultural

demands and specific resources to create a transitional synthesis of the old and new techniques of *paideia*. Had there been no Thespis and no Aeschylus, perhaps Greece would have been the poorer; but perhaps the pressures were great enough that tragedy or some other new genre would still have arisen, and we would have other names around which to wind our reveries.

The distinction between rhapsode and tragedian is underscored by a rough division between their two contests. In the rhapsodic competition, bards recited strictly from the two Homeric epics, which were now in a treasured form as written texts; tragedians could choose any kind of subject for their contest, but largely avoided the two epics. Such a set-up would allow for a friendly rivalry in the creation and maintenance of Athens' Hellenic heritage and cultural preeminence. But in this arrangement, if the rhapsodes had the privilege of singing Homer, teacher of all Greece, the tragedians had the advantage of performing every year (not just every fourth year) at a festival celebrating Athens' new political and economic order.[20]

Within the ancient world of the Mediterranean, Athens was uniquely capable of supporting tragedy. It was populous and wealthy. It had the kind of economic and political activity needed to foster alphabetic writing and individual creativity. It wasn't as weighted by the culture of the past as other places in Greece, and so was more open to innovation of this kind. But the same political, economic, and cultural pressures that led to the invention of tragedy also led to its dissolution. During the fourth century, with the transition from orality to literacy solidified, the old tragedy became more and more a thing of the past. Theater and drama remained; but the future belonged to a more fully literate performance.

For these reasons, tracing the origin of tragedy to satyr plays or other Dionysian rites would miss the point of tragedy's existence. In fact, the notion of "origins" speaks of a much more continuous, organic evolution than we see in the making of Greek tragedy. In making *tragôidia*, Thespis probably took techniques from earlier kinds of performance (such as dithyrambic choruses and iambic poetry) more or less as "raw materials." But he invented something radically different, fundamentally new. In the same sense, the movie was not an outgrowth of the theater, whatever their similarities. In both cases, it took a while for people to grasp the nature of the new medium. For example, when movies were first made, filmmakers often simply filmed stage plays. Later, techniques in camera use, editing and the like were developed, and acting altered to suit the new genre. We can see a similar evolution in Greek tragedy: it took time for the number of actors to increase, the chorus to shrink, and plot, character, and the other elements to approach historically normal qualities. But this analogy has another dimension. Both film and theater have connections to writing: as film is to the book (specifically, the novel), so theater is to the manuscript. They are, so to speak, the manual and mechanical reproductions of writing and action.

In the preceding discussion, I identified Greece's comparatively mixed and "decentralized" political-economic organization, particularly its vibrant merchant and artisan activity, and the associated rise in literacy (a kind of "decentralized knowledge") as the two principal forces which, being particularly intense in Athens, led to tragedy and gave it its specific shape. It would be informative to see if these conditions were also implicated when serious drama arose elsewhere. Another question my discussion raises concerns the definition of drama. Does writing make drama categorically distinct from other kinds of performance? Provisionally, I would have to say that it does-- that the conceptual basis of literary theater is unlike that of rituals, dream re-enactments, and other kinds of performance founded in orality. The correctness of this suggestion can be determined only by examining the character of performance in cultures with non-alphabetic scripts or without any writing at all. Finally, several writers have claimed that we are now approaching an age of post-literacy, that the dominance of writing is coming to an end. Ong, for example, finds that "The electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space . . . and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality" (135).[21] If this is true, we may conclude with Derrick de Kerckhove that "theater today is a dying genre . . . because radio, television and other oral media of communication are challenging literacy, which supports and nourishes theater" (35). Perhaps this diagnosis is correct. But electronic communication also offers new directions in the conceptual basis of performance, whether or not we call it theater. Rather than struggle to preserve theater from change or resign ourselves to guarding a museum, we may do better to consider how electronics transform the way we think and behave, and how these changes can be enacted. Consider, for example, that secondary (like primary) orality encourages social involvement and a sense of collective identity (Ong 136). Theater may cease to be relevant, unless it abandons "art for art's sake" and "simple entertainment value," and becomes socially engaged.

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Notes

1. Unlike modern societies, economics in that culture did not constitute a discrete sector of the social structure: it was more or less collapsed into the political realm (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 8-11; Finley 21-23). Evidence for any particular theory of the Greek economy is scanty and usually problematic. Consequently, there can be considerable disagreement on specific points; but a general consensus on it does seem to exist.

2. According to M.I. Finley, the Greek word for "freedom" had no equivalent in Near Eastern languages (28); if so, this would underscore the difference between these societies.

3. See for example Sydney Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Stephen Orgel, *Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975); and Roy Strong, *Splendor at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and the Theater of Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) or *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984).

4. Most scholars appear to give Pisistratus the credit for introducing the contest and bringing the texts to Athens. However, some sources point to Solon or to Pisistratus's son Hipparchus (Hippias' brother): compare Hammond 182-83; Fine 221; Else 47; Havelock, *Preface* 47; Havelock, *Lit. Rev.* 181.

5. Havelock, following Rhys Carpenter, dates the introduction of the Greek alphabet in the late eighth century; however, other scholars place it earlier, generally in the ninth or early eighth century.

6. Derrick de Kerckhove speculates that "Greek theater was one of the developments of the phonetic alphabet" (23; he does not attempt to substantiate his claims). Ong concurs: Greek drama was "the first western verbal art form to be fully controlled by writing" (148). Havelock takes the contrary position in his essay "The Oral Composition of Greek Drama" (*Lit. Rev.* 261-313): his belief that drama arose to provide an Attic supplement to Homer (263) means that both original and supplement are fundamentally oral. However, he does see in tragedy a "tension between the modes of oral and written communication" (although he calls that tension a "physiological" one), which eventually gives way to the literate orientation (265-66). I agree more with Havelock than with the others on this point, but none of them adequately accounts for the complexity of Greek tragedy and its history.

7. Derrida's contention that writing precedes speech (that speech is already a kind of writing) need not detain us. On the literal--I mean historical--level, orality clearly precedes alphabetic literacy; Derrida's point is on a theoretical level which could not exist save for writing itself. See also note 15.

8. The preference that Plato gives to speech over writing in his *Phaedrus* is, I believe, not akin to early-literate skepticism toward writing; but on this detail, see note 18. I am indebted to David Grene for bringing to my attention the evidence in Plato and Thucydides that follows.

9. This summary does not, of course, capture many of the complexities of orality and literacy. (For further details and support, see also Havelock, *Preface* 145-48, 197-210; McLuhan 15, 51-53, 56-60.) However, I believe it is necessary for me to address (albeit briefly) three concerns. First, the discussion above applies *only* to alphabetic writing; it may or may not apply to other scripts. Second, texts may appear autonomous, but they exist in a social context. Reading and writing entail beliefs, prior knowledge, interpretation, expectations and intentions, all of which are ideological. Third, the argument that orality and literacy have different effects on cognition may seem technologically deterministic. But as I hope I have shown, modes of communication are themselves subject to various social interests: literacy does not necessarily dominate over orality in all cultures, or among all people within a literate culture. Noting these stipulations, however, it still stands to reason that communication practices should shape what is communicated, and affect the people who use that practice. In other words, modes of communication involve "technologies of meaning" that affect the production, distribution, and consumption of thought as it is conducted among us and inside us.

10. The following discussion is partly based on Russo's five levels of "regularity" in epic poetry (43-46). However, for my purposes his first two levels (meter and rhythm) can be combined, and the fifth level of regularity (outlook) is defined so broadly that it holds true of almost all verbal art--and other arts as well. Thus my levels of regularity are rhythm, diction, and narrative structure. See Havelock (*Lit. Rev.* 283-92) for a similar analysis, using Aristophanes' *Frogs* as his guide. Also, my analysis supports Else's view of the rapid development of tragedy (summarized in Else 85).

11. Official and scholarly writing, on the other hand, seems to head toward dryness and obscurity. This is due in part to literacy, which fosters abstractness and isolation; and in part to social hierarchies, which restrict access to knowledge and create specialization.

12. Havelock argues that the tragedians most likely dictated their work (*Lit. Rev.* 265). This claim is supported only by a reference to the failing eyesight of an aging Sophocles. In his

eagerness to prove his case, Havelock neglects the ways in which the plays are unlike oral compositions.

13. The opposition between group and leader, the contrast between epic and linear time, and the juxtaposition of Doric dialect in the choral odes against Attic dialect (with Ionic and Homeric touches) in the dialogues all give the division between chorus and actor the appearance of an orality/literacy debate. Curiously, the size of the chorus rose from twelve under Aeschylus to fifteen under Sophocles and Euripides. The reason for this is uncertain; in any case, evidently the chorus disappeared by the late third century. The comic chorus went through a similar decline (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 234). Notably, old comedy did not have restrictions on the number of speaking parts. This point argues against a common "origin" of comedy and tragedy. The number of comic actors probably tightened down to three or four during the fifth century (Pickard-Cambridge, *Dram. Fest. Athens* 149). It may be that comedy and tragedy pressured each other's cast size (comedy pulling tragedy higher, tragedy tugging comedy lower), but this would not explain the fate of the chorus.

14. I am indebted to David Grene for this point.

15. Derrida's criticism (43-65) that speech too is a system of signs of signs (and thus is a variety of writing) may be true, but it has limited historical purchase. For the Greeks, both in theory and in practical experience (since writing was used to recall or elicit a vocalization and not read silently), writing was subsidiary to speech. That situation has held true for most of writing's history—indeed, many of us vocalize to this day. The point, in any case, is that their theory of speech and writing had practical consequences (as well as the practice affecting theory). One might say, ontology is historically conditioned.

16. Derrida poses a similar view of the relation between theater and writing (302-13). In his analysis of Rousseau, Derrida discusses public festival and oratory on the one hand, and theater and the actor on the other. This contrast may be compared to the opposition between the Athenians' Assembly and their tragedy.

17. I should note that in counterpoint to my argument (that literacy made theatrical performance comprehensible and acceptable), Kerckhove contends that "The theatrical processes amplified and extended to the non-literate members of the Athenian culture, some of the discreet [sic] effects which the phonetic alphabet generated among those who could already read and write" (23). Theater was used to advance literacy, visual supremacy, concepts of infinite space and related cognitive habits (so that theater made it possible for Cleisthenes to replace hereditary tribes with geographical tribes as the basic political structure in Athens, about 25 years after the first City Dionysia). Theater may indeed foster literate thinking, at least sometimes; but I think Kerckhove overstates the point. The festivals were surely the highlights of the year, but dramatic performance nonetheless occurred very infrequently. Emphasis would need to compensate for rarity, in order to produce the effects Kerckhove claims. It would also have to be possible to create literate thinking through oral art, which in a barely literate Athens seems difficult, given the evidence that Ong presents.

18. Something of the sort seems to have affected Plato, who praised speech over writing in *Phaedrus*, and expelled the poets from the Republic. Havelock, in a note concerning *Phaedrus*, contends that "his [Plato's] preference for oral methods was not only conservative but illogical, since the Platonic *episteme* which was to supplant *doxa* . . . was being nursed to birth by the literate revolution" (*Preface* 56 n17). But it hardly seems likely that Plato, so logical everywhere else (whatever one may think of his premises!), should suddenly lose his bearings on this important point. Plato was torn by the contradictions between his anti-mimetic philosophy and the mimetic underpinnings of writing (Hackforth summarizes the issues well in his edition of *Phaedrus* 162-64). It makes better sense to say that he was conscious of the contradictions because he was caught in the tension between orality to literacy, and furthermore that the privilege he gives to speech in *Phaedrus* is the logical outcome of the internalization of alphabetic writing: it is the phonocentrism, the quest underlying Western metaphysics for the full living presence of speech, which Derrida has so meticulously deconstructed (see Derrida 30-70, and Ong 167-68).

19. And possibly it was serious for reasons connected with literacy as well. Comic performance probably existed well before tragedy, that is, in wholly oral cultures (see Else 24);

it seems reasonable to suspect that the epistemological (and pedagogical) assumptions of farce differ from tragedy.

20. I am considering only festivals within Athens itself: the tragedians could see their work produced at rural festivals in Attica, and the rhapsodes could tour or give private recitations as always; but these arrangements had lower prestige.

21. See also, for example, McLuhan 5, 8, 26-32; and for a summary of the issues, Ong 135-38.

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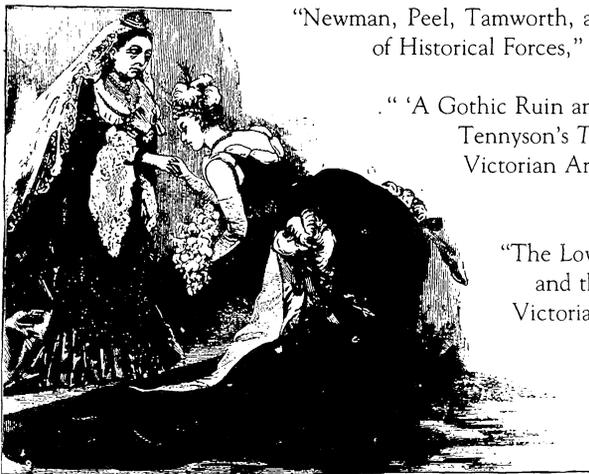
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