PART II

GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD
TROJAN PALIMPSESTS:
THE RELATION OF GREEK TRAGEDY TO THE
HOMERIC EPICS

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I. Attic Tragedies as Homeric “Paratexts?”—The Trojan War on the
Tragic Stage

According to a well-known dictum, the tragedian Aeschylus character-
ized his plays as “slices from the great banquets of Homer” (Athenaeus
8.347e). Indeed, the myth of the Trojan War, the subject of the Homeric
epics Iliad and Odyssey as well as of the cyclic epics complementing
them, informs the plot not only of Aeschylus’ own Oresteia, but of
almost half of the still extant Greek tragedies. The fifteen Attic trag-
edies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides dealing with the Trojan
War span the whole range of the war and its consequences, from the
pre-war situation to its aftermath, the homecoming of the Greek vic-
tors and their further sufferings. In view of their performance dates,
these tragedies cover a crucial period of Athenian history from 458
to 400 B.C.E., clustering around the period of the Peloponnesian War
between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies from 431 to 404.
To be sure, these plays represent only a tiny fraction of the original
production of tragedies, for during the fifth century B.C.E., every year
three tragic trilogies were brought to stage in Athens at the festival of
the Great Dionysia. Nevertheless, the high number of fragments and

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1 I would like to thank the organizers of the Palimpsests Symposium at Vienna for
inviting me in place of Prof. Annette Harder (Groningen), who unfortunately was not
able to attend, and all the participants for the stimulating discussion. Philip Alexander
kindly corrected my English.

2 The fifteen extant Trojan tragedies (in their narrative order within the Trojan
cycle) are: pre-war: Euripides, Iphigeneia at Aulis (406/400 B.C.E.); war: Sophocles, Ajax
(ca. 450?), Philoctetes (409), [Euripides], Rhesus (4th century?); aftermath: Euripides,
The Trojan Women (415), Hecuba (ca. 426?), Andromache (ca. 425?); homecoming
and subsequent generation: Euripides, Helen (412); Aeschylus, Oresteia (Agamemnon,
Choeponoi, Eumenides) (458); Sophocles, Electra (?); Euripides, Electra (ca. 417?),
Orestes (408), Iphigeneia in Tauris (ca. 413?).