PROPPING UP GREEK TRAGEDY: THE RIGHT USE OF OPISI

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In this chapter, I undertake first to show that Aristotle, in the Poetics, does not take the negative view of opsis or visual effects that many scholars suppose; rather, he maintains that the use of such effects must be in the service of the emotions proper to tragedy. Second, I argue that the Greek tragedians indeed used stage props and other visible items in the way that Aristotle recommends, and I provide several illustrative instances.

After enumerating the six parts or elements of tragedy, and describing the first four (plot, character, thought, and diction), Aristotle goes on to state (Poetics 1450b15–20):

Of the last [two], melody is the greatest of the relishes [ἡδονήσματα], whereas visual effect [ἐξήματι] is indeed the most stirring, but also the most unartistic [ἀρχηγότατον] and least appropriate to the poetic art. For the power of tragedy exists even without performance and actors, and besides, the art of the stage designer is more important than that of poets in regard to the production of visual effects.

This statement has led scholars to infer that Aristotle held the visual aspect of tragedy (and to a degree also musical accompaniment) in contempt, and in explanation of his attitude it has been suggested (among other things) that he encountered drama chiefly through texts rather than in performance.¹

¹ This chapter is dedicated to my friend and colleague, Stavroula Kiritsi, who has taught me much about the performance of ancient drama. I wish also to thank Anne-Sophie Noel for detailed comments on an earlier draft; I am particularly grateful to her for sending me a copy of her unpublished talk (see Noel unpublished in the bibliography), and to see that we are largely in agreement about Aristotle and the role of props.

¹ See, e.g., Taplin (1977b) 477, who suggests that, on Aristotle’s view, “the play is best appreciated when read”; Halliwell (1986) 343, for the idea that “Aristotle was responding ... to the loosening of the bond between text and performance”; Bonanno 1997 on the intensely literary environment of the late fourth century (it was the time when Lycurgus collected the scripts of tragedy for preservation); also Hunter 2002. On Aristotle and reading of scripts, see Bassi 2006. Billault 2001 suggests that Aristotle was responding to the relative decline of the role of the poet in the 4th century, which was eclipsed by that of the actors and khôrâgôs: “En distinguant l’art poétique du spectacle théâtral, il [Aristotle] sépare aussi le poète de ceux dont l’activité permet les representations.” Marzullo 1980 suggests that Aristotle was reacting rather to the exaggerated use of visual effects in tragedy of his own time; J.I. Porter (2010)
But Aristotle's view of *opsis* is more nuanced than many commentators have supposed. Thus, a little later (1453b1–14) he affirms that “it is possible, to be sure, for what is frightening [τὸ φοβερόν] and pitiable to arise from visual effects, but it is also possible for it to arise from the arrangement of events itself, which is prior and pertains to the better poet.” Aristotle then explains why: “For the plot must be arranged in such a way that one who hears the events both shudders and feels pity as a result of what occurs, even without seeing them: this is what one would experience upon hearing the plot of the *Oedipus.*” Aristotle goes on to observe:

To provide this by way of visual effect is more unartistic and also requires financial support. Those who provide not what is frightening but rather merely what is monstrous [τὸ τερατῶδες] via visual effect have nothing in common with tragedy. For one must not seek every kind of pleasure from tragedy, but just that which is appropriate to it. Since the poet must provide pleasure from pity and fear through representation, it is clear that this must be embedded in the events.

Aristotle would seem to be allowing that the tragic emotions can be elicited by *opsis*, but that this is properly the job of the story. Hence, a tragic poet must not rely on visual effects alone, or primarily. But he then appears to qualify this concession by associating *opsis* with a certain kind of shock effect rather than with the emotions of pity and fear proper. At least to the extent that visual effects are productive of this alternate response, it is not appropriate to exploit them in tragedy. Toward the end of the *Poetics*, however, where Aristotle extols tragedy as superior to epic, he seems to grant visual effects a greater value. He repeats that one can appreciate drama, like epic, by reading, but adds that tragedy has everything that epic has (it can even exploit the hexameter meter), but has “in addition, as no small element, music and

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115 affirms: “If Aristotle claims to be able to experience fear and terror (and therefore pity and possibly catharsis) merely from reading *Oedipus the King*, or from hearing it read, then it is surely because in his mind’s eye he is hearing the voices, the screams, the choral antiphonies, the verbal rhythms, the staccatos and stichomythias, is visualizing the staging and the scenery, the stumbling of the blinded king, and so on, just as the poet had done when he composed the drama to begin with.” Contra Scott 1999, who insists that dance (and to a lesser degree spectacle) were essential to Aristotle’s theory of tragedy; on the importance of music, see Sifakis (2001) 54–71, who defends, among other things, the importance of relishes in cuisine (“without θέδουσματα there is no cooking”, p. 57).

2 Cf. De Marinis (2009) 1 “pur restando, nell’insieme, all’interno di una concezione del teatro come fatto verbale-letterario, le considerazioni che il filosofo antico [i.e., Aristotle] dedica alle varie componenti semiologiche ed espressive dello spettacolo, e in particolare ai rapporti fra testo scritto e scena, sono in realtà molto più complesse e sfaccettate, quando non contraddittorie, di quel che risulta di solito dalle moderne interpretazioni della *Poetica.*