HAVEN’T I SEEN YOU BEFORE SOMEWHERE?
OPTICAL ALLUSIONS IN REPUBLICAN TRAGEDY

Robert Cowan

To discuss the visual dimension of Republican tragedy, we must inevitably climb to our seat in the cauea and enter a world of speculation. An important recent study of the genre gloomily begins “Roman republican tragedy has all but disappeared”; gloomily, but all too accurately. The surviving fragments are numerous, to be sure, but often very brief and decontextualized, so that it is always challenging, and sometimes nigh-impossible, to reconstruct what was said (or sung) and the outline of the plot. To reconstruct what the theatrical spectacle looked like is even harder. The task is already difficult for those examining the visual elements of Greek drama or Roman comedy, but even the few aids which are available to them are denied to the student of Republican tragedy. Since, until the construction of Pompey’s theatre in 55 BCE, all Roman dramas were performed on temporary stages, which were taken down after the festival, the archaeological evidence even for the layout of the stage is inevitably exiguous. The remarkable range of theatrical images preserved on vases from Magna Graecia is not only difficult to interpret, but generally predates the heyday of Republican drama and represents exclusively Greek tragedy and comedy. As a first note of optimism, however, these artefacts do provide important evidence that tragic scenes could be recognized (with or without the aid of name-labels) on the basis of their visual dimension by communities in Italy, whether or not they had first-hand experience of actual performances.

1 For brevity and convenience, fragments are cited from what remains the standard edition of all the fragments of Roman tragedy, Ribbeck (1897), and the most easily-available and, for Anglophone readers at least, most user-friendly, Warmington (1936). The standard editions of the individual dramatists, Jocelyn (1967), Dangel (1995) and Schierl (2006), all include concordances between their and Ribbeck’s numerations.
3 A good survey of the evidence and a persuasive hypothesis may be found in Goldberg (1998).
4 Among the considerable and growing body of scholarship, see esp. Taplin (1992) and (2007), and most recently Revermann (2010) and Csapo (2010) 38–82. Csapo (140–167) also dismisses Roman mosaics of Menandrian scenes as evidence for the performance of Greek New Comedy at Rome.
Yet it is the loss of the playscripts themselves which is the most damaging. Much of our understanding (or at least our beliefs) about the theatrical aspects of Greek drama and Roman comedy, though supplemented by archaeological evidence and testimonia in non-dramatic texts, is derived from what can be deduced from the surviving scripts. We know that Agamemnon walks into his palace on the purple tapestry which Clytemnestra has rolled out because he tells us that he is about to do so. We know that the personified Demos has been rejuvenated in the Propylaea and emerges on the *ekkykléma* in splendid attire because the Sausage-seller describes this as it happens. We know that Theopropides knocks loudly at the door of his locked house, because he announces his intention to do so and accompanies it with appropriate shouts. Most scholars would agree, while making the same allowance as him for the unknowability of the details, with Taplin’s “fair rule of thumb that the significant stage action is implicit in the text.”

The surviving fragments of Republican tragedy do throw up the occasional cue to such effect. In Ennius’ *Hectoris Lytra*, Patroclus makes it clear that Eurypylus is beginning to faint from his injuries, and Eurypylus in turn indicates that, as at the end of *Iliad* 11, Patroclus binds his wound. Pacuvius’ *Parthenopaean* leaves neither the ancient audience nor the modern reader in any doubt that he is showing a recognition token (be it a ring or an bracelet) to his mother, the eponymous Atalanta: *suspensum in laeuo brachio ostendo ungulum* (“I am showing [you] the ring hung on my left arm”). Likewise, when the unidentified speaker of Accius, *Amphitruo* fr. 86 R^3^=50 W asks *set quaenam haec mulier est funesta ueste, tonsu lugubri?* (“But who on earth is this woman in funereal dress, with hair loosed in mourning?”), we may share his or her puzzlement regarding her identity (though Alcumena must be the most likely candidate), but we are quite sure about both the fact of her entrance and the nature and

---

5 ἐπεί δ’ ἀκούειν σοί κατέστραμμα τάδα, / εἰς ἄδμοις μέλαβρα πορφύρας πατών (A. Ag. 956–957); ἕδ’ ἔκεινος ὄρδαν τεττυγοφόρας, ὁρχαῖον σχῆματι λαμπρός., / σοι χορινῶν ἄξων ἄλλα σπονδῶν, εὐφύρη κατάλειπτος (Ae. Eq. 1331–1332); *sed quid hoc? occlusa ianua est interdixi. / pultabo. heus, ecquis intust? aperitin fores?* (Pl. Mos. 444–445).  

6 Taplin (1978) 17. See also the Introduction to this volume, p. 4.  


8 Pac. *Atalanta* fr. 64 R^3^=59 W. As Schierl (2006) 178 ad loc. notes, “Mit ostendō kommentiert der Sprecher seine Handlung”; she further compares Epidicus’ em, *ostendo manus*. (Pl. Epid. 683). Müller’s emendation *ostende*, though considered “erwägenswert” by Schierl and approvingly mentioned by Warmington, seems unnecessary. If correct, it would still serve as a visual cue, as Atalanta instructs Parthenopaean to perform the same action.