De novis libris iudicia


Ancient Greek theatre performance in the fifth century BC is a puzzling field of research. Contemporary sources other than the play texts are sparse, and the play texts themselves offer only limited access to their own visualisation. Many practical issues are the subject of an ongoing debate, e.g. the use and appearance of the skênê, the question of a raised stage, the orchêstra as playing space for chorus and actors, vocal delivery, music and dancing, and so forth. Graham Ley’s publication is an inspiring contribution to this debate. His main proposition is that throughout the fifth century BC authors composed their tragedies primarily for the orchêstra as the central playing space for chorus and actors, also after the introduction of the skênê and the third actor (first attested in Oresteia). He substantiates this in two chapters, one devoted to the use of the playing space in a number of tragedies, the other to choral performance in Greek culture in general and in the Athenian theatre in particular. Throughout the book Ley offers a balanced evaluation of both the limited evidence of our sources and current critical theory based on these sources.

In his preface, Ley sets out the minimal requirements for the theatrical space to accommodate the various performances that were shown during the Great Dionysia in Athens. This space should allow for the fifty dancers in the circular choruses of the dithyramb, as well as for the set, actors and chorus of tragedy and comedy performances. Ley proposes a working model of the theatrical space that meets these requirements. Although the details of his model are open to debate, it would not be productive to embark on such discussion here. Its basic tenets are sound enough to make it a solid building stone for the main argument of the first chapter.

Ley claims that commentators who write on the performance of ancient Greek tragedy tend to privilege the skênê as the primary locus of the action and to focus on the actors rather than on the interrelation between actors and chorus. In doing so, they ignore the historical primacy of the orchêstra as playing space before the skênê was introduced and of the chorus as its permanent occupant and prime addressee for the actors/characters (Ley’s term) who arrived in that playing space.
Although the skênê complemented the orchêstra with a new material object that had the potential to dominate the entire physical action, a close examination of the Oresteia and of many Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedies shows that this domination did not materialize. Ley examines three scene types to support this view. One involves the presence of an altar or tomb in the orchêstra, often as place of supplication, the other the arrival of actors/characters in a carriage in the open ground of the playing space. The third scene type consists of actors/characters who dance and sing in the orchêstra and may be joined by the chorus. Ley concludes that in these plays the skênê, although it may be a well defined second location, often fulfils only a marginal or at most temporary role as playing space. Readers may not be convinced by every detailed movement and disposition Ley proposes in the diagrams that illustrate his analysis of individual scenes, nor with every suggestion he makes in passing about general matters of staging. But that does not affect the attractiveness of his general conclusion that the basic pattern for the composition of Greek tragedy remained unaltered throughout the fifth century BC—the orchêstra being the main playing space for both actors/characters and chorus—and that many works of Sophocles and Euripides in this respect reflect continuity rather than innovation.

If the orchêstra was the basic playing space throughout the fifth century, its main occupant, the chorus, retained a central place in the performance. For us it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine what that implied in terms of composition and audience reception. According to Ley, our familiar tools to make sense of the tragic chorus and to bridge the fundamental gap between the original Athenian performance context and our own modern theatrical conventions often fall short. We may obtain a better understanding of its essence if we examine it within the broader cultural context of choral composition. For the Greek spectators, a chorus in a tragedy was not a strange and isolated phenomenon as it is for us, but one of many choral manifestations, some of which were also theatrical: dithyrambic, satyr play, and comedy choruses. Central to all these choral manifestations is the concept of choreia, the strict unity of music (including the words) and dancing, often in a composed form. Evidence about the practice of these various types of choreia may help us to imagine what the composition and performance of a tragic chorus implied. Ley opens his second chapter with a re-evaluation of the little scraps of evidence from epic down to the Attic theatre. Major studies on music and dance are reviewed critically and current ideas about e.g. the emotionality of certain metres or the mimetic quality of the ancient dance (including that of tragedy), or indeed the assumption that the tragic chorus was rectangular, are rejected or reasonably modified. The ensuing image of ancient choral performance in practice (including that of the tragic chorus) is terribly fragmented. Given the paucity