

Συναγωνίζεσθαι  
Studies in Honour of Guido Avezzù

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi, Francesco Lupi,  
Gherardo Ugolini



**Skenè Studies I • 1**

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# “We were there too”: Philosophers in the Theatre\*

STEPHEN HALLIWELL

## Abstract

This article challenges the longstanding perception of both Plato and Aristotle as representatives of a philosophical aversion to the values of theatrical performance. Starting from some reflections on the ambiguous evidence of our classical sources for the relationship of Socrates to the theatre, the argument proceeds to a close reading of some key Platonic and Aristotelian texts on the dynamics of theatrical experience. In Plato’s case, the analysis shows that despite a generalised concern about the ‘crowd psychology’ of theatre audiences, including the famous theatrocracy passage of the *Laws*, there is a clear acknowledgement that theatrical performance has an imaginative and emotional power which can penetrate the souls even of philosophers. In Aristotle’s case, attention is drawn, above all, to the often neglected evidence of the *Rhetoric*, which contains specific and revealing testimony to its author’s admiration for individual actors (of both tragedy and comedy), thereby supplementing, rather than clashing with, the theoretical principles set out in the *Poetics*. Far from being indifferent to theatrical performance, Aristotle can be seen to have recognised its distinctive capacity to give compelling embodiment to the mimetic worlds of drama.

Just before Agathon delivers his formal speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, he semi-humorously accuses Socrates of trying to make him nervous about his performance in front of the present company, which he calls a ‘theatre audience’ (θέατρον: 194a).

\* It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to a volume in honour of Guido Avezzi, a connoisseur of Athenian theatre and drama. Earlier versions of some of the arguments in this paper benefited from discussion with audiences at Chicago, Cornell, Northwestern, Oslo and Yale Universities. All translations are my own.



Socrates objects, pointing out that only a few days earlier he had publicly observed Agathon's self-confidence when the playwright mounted the platform with his actors in front of a very large audience at, so we infer, the *proagon*, the advance presentation for the Lenaea festival of 416 at which Agathon's play went on to win first prize.<sup>1</sup> Why, asks Socrates, should someone who could speak with assurance in front of such a large crowd feel at all disconcerted speaking before a much smaller gathering like a drinking party? When Agathon replies that he is not so obsessed with theatrical success as to be unaware that a few intelligent people constitute a more formidable audience than "many stupid" people, Socrates acknowledges the principle but adds: "I suspect, however, that we may not be these wise few – after all, we were there too and were part of the mass audience".<sup>2</sup>

There are several strands to the psychology of this passage, bound together all the more intricately by an element of irony on both sides of the conversation. Two remarks in particular are worth making, one a point of quasi-historical specificity, the other a broader matter of cultural values. The specific point is the implication, which Plato is happy to permit, that Socrates himself, together with all or most of the other guests at Agathon's party, had been present at the *proagon*. But why, as friends or close acquaintances of Agathon's, would they attend the *proagon* and not the dramatic performance itself (on a later day)? I think that a fourth-century reader of the *Symposium* would be likely to understand Plato's character Socrates to be speaking as someone who would willingly have been in the audience at the staging of Agathon's tragedy, whether or not that had actually been true of the historical Socrates. My second, broader observation is that Socrates' comment quoted above shrewdly draws attention to the difficulty of drawing a sharp dividing line between the culture of the 'few' and that of the indiscriminating masses. There exists, for

1 On the *proagon* see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 67-8, Csapo and Slater 1995: 109-10, and Wilson 2000: 96, but the latter is wrong (345n209) to ascribe to Dover (1980: 122) the view that Plato's text refers to the performance proper, not the *proagon*.

2 ἀλλὰ μὴ οὐχ οὔτοι ἡμεῖς ὄμεν — ἡμεῖς μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐκεῖ παρήμεν καὶ ἤμεν τῶν πολλῶν (*Smp.* 194c).

sure, a vocabulary in which such a distinction can be drawn. But what happens if those who might consider themselves among the sophisticated few take part in the same forms of cultural activity as the 'many'? What happens, more concretely, if philosophers go to the theatre and thereby seemingly place themselves, as members of a self-defining elite, in an ambivalent relationship to the supposed culture of the many?

It is that general question – what happens when philosophers go to the theatre? – which I shall take as my frame of reference in the present paper. I do so in order to offer some reflections on the relationship of Plato and Aristotle to the theatre, in both cases challenging a prevalent view of these thinkers as largely uninterested in, if not averse to, the performative materiality of poetic, musical, and related arts.<sup>3</sup> With Plato, my basic contention is that there is more to the attitudes to theatre expressed in the dialogues than the putative antipathy which modern orthodoxy locates in them. Plato's work may have provided substance for an 'antitheatrical prejudice' (Barish 1981: 5-31) that has produced a series of manifestations over the past two and a half millennia, but the dialogues also contain revealing testimony to the special psychological power of theatre as a form of experience capable of affecting even philosophers: that testimony needs registering more strongly in its own right than is usually done. In Aristotle's case, I shall argue that a modern consensus, shared by many classicists and theatre historians, not only distorts a nuanced feature of the perspective on theatrical performance found in the *Poetics* but flies in the face of widely neglected historical evidence about the philosopher's own experience. If, to quote a sweeping but representative allegation by one classicist and critic, Aristotle was "indifferent to spectacle, music, and theatricality" (Green 2012: 56), how can it be that he is the only figure connected to the theatrical culture of classical Athens who actually identifies for us his favourite tragic and comic actors? (I shall return to these actors in due course). And how can it be that Aristotle set up a project to inves-

3 Duncan (2005: 59) is symptomatic of the prevailing consensus in bracketing together Plato and Aristotle as "antitheatrical thinkers" without the need for further justification.

tigate the institution of Athenian theatre through archival study of its didascalical records (Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 71)? Why would someone supposedly ‘indifferent’ to theatricality have thought it worthwhile to do such a thing?

Anyone who attempts to reconstruct something of the lived experience of Plato and Aristotle in relation to Athenian theatre and its attendant musico-poetic culture needs to bear in mind a double asymmetry between the two thinkers in this respect. Since he grew up in Athens, Plato could well have attended the theatre even as a boy and certainly as a young man. Aristotle, however, was already an adult when he came to Athens in or around 367. Prior to that, he might have had some experience of theatre, though we cannot quantify the likelihood of this, at the royal court in Macedon, where – among other considerations – both Euripides and Agathon had spent extended periods in the late fifth century, and where a theatre was built at Aigai at some point in the early fourth century (Csapo 2010: 99, 172-3). But to that biographical asymmetry we need to add the significant factor that while Aristotle can and does cite numerous figures (not only in the *Poetics* but also in the *Rhetoric* and occasionally elsewhere too) from fourth-century Athenian theatre, including the playwrights Astydamas, Carcinus, and Theodectes (as well as those favourite actors to be considered in due course), the fifth-century settings of Plato’s dialogues naturally make it impossible for them to include any such direct references. This dramatically necessitated silence deprives us of any explicit evidence for Plato’s relationship to contemporary theatre in the fourth century. It does not, however, preclude the possibility, which is relevant to the argument to be advanced in this paper, that Plato drew on his own experience of the theatre when putting certain remarks in the mouth of his character Socrates or, equally, of the Athenian in the *Laws*.

Before turning to the most important Platonic passages for my purposes, it is worth a brief sidelong glance at the image of Socrates found in a very different kind of text. Clearly we are in no position to determine whether, or how often, the historical Socrates might have attended the theatre, but our classical sources do contain some tantalising ambiguities in relation to this is-

sue.<sup>4</sup> Most intriguing is the final ode of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where the chorus proclaims that keeping company with Socrates, and engaging in (philosophical) chatter with him, entails rejecting something of importance about tragedy and about the culture of poetry more generally. The person who sits talking with Socrates is described as "rejecting *mousikê*" (ἀποβαλόντα μουσικήν) as well as "the most important things about the art of tragedy" (τά τε μέγιστα . . . τῆς τραγωδικῆς τέχνης, 1491-5). The force of this satirical passage remains complex and somewhat elusive, not least because it implicates in its charge of seemingly antitheatrical philistinism none other than the playwright Euripides himself (Halliwell 2011: 148-53). In a further paradox, we know that elsewhere in comedy Euripides was the object of a repeated gibe that he actually received help from Socrates in writing his plays (Wildberg 2012: 25-6). Whatever the origin of the gibe, it is of great significance that, together with the cited passage from *Frogs*, it eventually came to be taken seriously by Friedrich Nietzsche: without Old Comedy – however counterintuitive and ironic this may seem – one of the central theses of *The Birth of Tragedy* might never have been conceived (Snell 1953: 119-21; Ugolini 2007: 119-21). The details of Euripides' actual relationship to Socrates are irrecoverable, though it is fascinating that Aeschines of Sphettus went so far as to make the playwright a character in his Socratic dialogue *Miltiades*: we have Oxyrhynchus papyrus fragments of the work's prologue (*POxy.* XXXIX 2889-90) which name Euripides among a small group which is precisely sitting around talking with Socrates in the stoa of Zeus (Giannantoni 1990: II 62-3). The final ode in Aristophanes' *Frogs* pictures both a Socrates and a Euripides who are supposedly hostile to the real values of tragic poetry, but the double-edged nature of this pairing leaves us none the wiser about

4 As regards Socrates' possible attendance at comic theatre, the most interesting suggestion in a classical source is at Xen. *Oec.* 3.7, which refers to Critobulus's habit of trying (with what success, we are left to surmise) to persuade Socrates to go and watch comic plays with him. I leave aside here worthless postclassical anecdotes such as the one at Ael. *VH* 2.13 about Socrates standing up in the theatre during the first performance of *Clouds*; that same chapter makes the equally worthless claim that Socrates rarely attended the theatre but made an exception for the plays of Euripides.

the kind of experience that the ‘real’ Socrates might have sought (or avoided) in the theatre.

Whatever speculations one might venture about the historical Socrates, Plato is certainly prepared to project onto the Socratic persona of his dialogues both a familiarity with, and an anxiety about, theatrical experience.<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what he does in the most far-reaching of all Platonic texts about the theatre – a text, in fact, with a strong bearing on my guiding question of what happens when philosophers go to the theatre. In this passage from *Republic* book 10 Socrates brings what he calls “the greatest charge” against the poets, namely that they can impair the souls of even good people, “apart from some very few” (605c). In formulating his case, Socrates uses emphatic first-person plurals to describe the experience in the theatre (as well as at recitals of epic) of what he calls “the best of us”:

You know that even the best of us, when we listen to Homer or some other tragic poet dramatising one of the heroes in a state of grief . . . or characters chanting and beating their breasts, take great pleasure in this and, surrendering ourselves, follow with sympathetic emotion, and we earnestly praise as a good poet whoever works this effect on us to the highest degree . . . Well does not the same argument also apply to what is comic: namely that when there are jokes you would be ashamed to make yourself but which you greatly enjoy hearing in a comic performance or even in private, and which you fail to condemn as foul, you are behaving in the same way as in the experience of pity? The impulse which you used your reason to suppress in yourself when it wanted to play the comic, because you were afraid to acquire a reputation for buffoonery, is what you then in turn release; and by behaving *there* [sc. in the theatre] in an adolescent manner, you are often induced unawares into becoming a comic poet in your own life. (*R.* 10.605c-d + 606c)

5 It is worth recalling that in the famous passage at *Pl. Ap.* 22a Socrates is presented as a *reader* of tragedy: tragedians are specified first in the list of categories of poets whom he interrogates about the meaning of their work, and on the basis, it should be noted, of his own prior selection of what he takes to be their most carefully wrought writings (22b); on the complications of the passage, see Halliwell 2011: 155-66.

This passage is strikingly 'confessional' on two levels. On the first or dramatic level, Socrates is depicted as sharing with Glaucon an unequivocally inward familiarity ("you know that . . .") with what it is like to participate in the intense and collective emotional experience of theatre. On a second level, that of the dialogue's communication with its own readers, there is a tacit appeal to those who can themselves connect with what Socrates describes and can consider the relevance of his critique to their own experience. And the shared implication of those two points is that the psychological power of theatre can affect even philosophers – real-world philosophers in a place like Athens, at any rate, whatever might be posited about the ideal philosophers of the *Republic's* Callipolis.

At the same time, however, the passage I have quoted alerts us to a possible tension in Socrates' stance towards theatrical experience. Theatre can be thought of here as possessing two main dimensions: one of these is as a social manifestation of 'mass culture' (Socrates has already referred, at 604e, to "mass gatherings of heterogeneous crowds packed into theatres", πανηγύρει καὶ παντοδαποῖς ἀνθρώποις εἰς θέατρα συλλεγομένοις), the other as a context in which concentrated emotions are released within each member of the audience. The social dynamics of the occasion and the psychagogic or soul-changing nature of the experience are conceptually separable, though Socrates seems concerned precisely about the conjunction of the two things. There is no doubt that in the wording of the passage at 604e the Platonic Socrates echoes an anxiety about mixed crowds which was typical of an elite mentality in classical Athens, though we might also choose to see it as related to a more distinctively Socratic 'ochlophobia'.<sup>6</sup> But in the previous quotation, at both 605c-d (in relation to tragedy) and 606c (in relation to comedy), Socrates seems to assume a more subtle model of crowd psychology whereby collectively exhibited emotions help to intensify the experience of individuals, even philosophical individuals. Both the verb 'surrender' or 'yield'

6 The most direct evocation of this trait of the Platonic Socrates is found at *Smp.* 174a, where Socrates says that he had absented himself from the celebrations of the day before the party because of his fear of the crowds that would be there, φοβηθεὶς τὸν ὄχλον.

(ἐνδιδόναι) and the phrase “we follow with sympathetic emotion” (ἐπόμεθα συμπάσχοντες) stress a process of emotional intensification that might be taken to involve assimilation of the individual to the group, while the description of the response to comedy emphasises the theatre as a sort of ‘safe environment’ (“by behaving *there* . . .”) where it is the norm for certain impulses to be indulged in the company of others who are doing the same.

Even so, closer inspection of Socrates’ words shows that he presents the emotional experience of theatre audiences as something more than a crudely contagious phenomenon. The individual spectator’s mind is depicted as responding not to other members of the audience but to the world imaginatively enacted in the dramatic performance, whether the grief of tragic heroes and choruses which induces intense sympathy, or, equally, the disreputable behaviour of comic characters which induces a quasi-adolescent mirth and a suspension of shame (a point Freud would later repeat in a perhaps half-unconscious echo of Plato; Halliwell 2008: 255-6). Moreover, the spectator’s evaluative judgement – a judgement that a work, or its poet, is ‘good’ (605d) – applies directly to the poetic qualities which give the dramatic world its compelling emotional presence. The judgement in question, then, is logically detachable from the social circumstances in which the performance takes place.

If Plato has a claim to be considered, among so much else, the first ‘crowd psychologist’, the passage of *Republic* book 10 on which I have focussed is a text where he goes out of his way to foreground one kind of experience to which even a philosopher may yield as part of a mass audience: an experience in which certain forces of psychological resistance are overcome by an ill-defined combination of the social occasion and the imaginative power of dramatic poetry. The complex implications of that passage, where Socrates both condemns what poetry can do to the soul and yet speaks with apparent inwardness of the difficulty of resisting it, need to be set against the more sweeping and externalised images of theatre audiences found in some other Platonic contexts. Consider, for instance, the strongly atmospheric evocation of crowd behaviour in a passage from book 6 of the *Republic* which includes the theatre as one of a series of mass (democratic) institutions and social settings. Proposing to

Adeimantus that it is the majority of citizens, not individual sophists, who pose the greatest danger to the philosophical soul, Socrates refers to the power of mass opinion on occasions "when", as he puts it, "many people crowd together into assemblies, lawcourts, theatres, military camps . . . and noisily criticise or approve things that are said or done, going to excess in both directions, with outbursts of shouting and applause, while the rocky locations around them echo and duplicate the noise of their criticism and approval" (6.492b, cf. *Laws* 9.876b). Although this evocative description has a broad political slant, it also has significance for the theatre in its own right, suggesting that the physical and group dynamics of audience responses amplify the psychological impact of the occasion. It is worth adding that the passage chimes with our other evidence for the vocal and demonstrative *habitus* of Athenian theatre audiences: many sources refer, for instance, to open weeping at tragedy, and others to the scope for collective evaluative reactions, which might be carried in the case of disapproval to the point of hissing actors off stage (Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 272-8; Wallace 1997: 101-6).

It is obligatory here to remind ourselves of the famous coinage, 'theatrocracy' (θεατροκρατία), in book 3 of Plato's *Laws* (700a-1a). It occurs in a passage where the Athenian suggests – without, of course, any historical validation – that theatrical and musical audiences had once been much less vocal in their responses than they have now become (whether 'now' means the later fifth century or a later date),<sup>7</sup> and that it was only as the result of the subversion of traditional norms by crowd-pleasing performers that mass audiences displaced the older 'aristocracy' (701a) of cultural excellence, thereby arrogating to themselves the status of connoisseurs and judges. On the face of it, teatrocracy denotes a sort of cacophonous mob-rule in the domain of poetic and musical tastes (Micalella 1995). But even the Athenian's complaint about catcalling and other collective audience reactions allows us to see that more is at stake here than the strictly physical and vocal be-

7 There is some reason to take the dramatic date of *Laws* to be the late-fifth century: Nails 2002: 197-8, 328. But many interpreters automatically assume a fourth-century date closer to the date of composition: see Wallace 1997: 99-101 for some discussion of the issue.



haviour of large audiences. The rhetoric of aversion to such behaviour *per se* (along with a dubiously schematic model of historical changes in the nature of Greek poetry and music) still leaves visible a fundamental concern with the public expression of cultural values – marked by strong affirmations of approval and disapproval – within the framework of the theatre as a civic institution.

If we look back once more, with that in mind, at the critique of tragic and comic drama in *Republic* book 10, it becomes even clearer that although anxiety about social heterogeneity leaks into, and colours, the account of the psychology of theatre audiences, the brunt of Socrates' complaint concerns something which goes beyond immersion in the circumambient atmosphere of the occasion. What he maintains is that the souls or minds of individuals, including philosophers, are exposed – with all their own *internal* possibilities of division and conflict (the 'city in the soul') – to the imaginative and emotional power of the performance itself. I say 'the performance itself', but we need to observe that there is no reference to actors in this part of book 10. The function of performers is apparently taken for granted; there is no separate consideration, of the kind we will tellingly find in Aristotle, of their mediating role between work and audience. Socrates had twice referred to actors earlier in the *Republic*, and it is also worth remembering that the famous passage in book 5 about the 'lovers of sights and sounds' who are addicted to theatrical festivals, indicates that such people value all sensory aspects of performance ("beautiful voices, colours, and shapes") in their own right.<sup>8</sup> But in the crucial passage of book 10 Socrates treats performance, by implication, as a transparent medium that gives psychologically direct exposure to the characters, events, and emotions represented in the imagined world of the drama.

What is more, that psychological exposure is described in terms which prevent it from being an entirely passive experience. If Socrates identifies a kind of 'surrender' at the heart of the spectator's reaction to tragedy (and, *mutatis mutandis*, to comedy as

<sup>8</sup> There are passing references to actors at *R.* 2.373b and 3.395a; the lovers of sights and sounds appreciate all sensory aspects of theatrical performance (*R.* 5.476b).

well), that is a voluntary act motivated by a desire for a particular type of pleasure, and it is sustained, as we have seen, by judgments of poetic value: to attend the theatre is self-evidently a decision to seek such pleasurable experience. At *Republic* 606b the soul is said to justify such pleasure to itself as legitimately contained within a form of imaginative spectatorship which it feels to be somehow dissociated or isolated from the demands of its own life. Socrates' critique as a whole suggests that there is an element of self-deception at work in such justification. But it also pays theatre a kind of compliment for its psychological power. Whatever else is happening to the soul of the philosopher in the theatre, it is not being simply submerged in the collective excitement of a crowd but, rather, being seduced into a sort of active complicity in the intensely emotional interest of what is exhibited on stage.<sup>9</sup>

My contention, then, is that Plato deliberately projects onto Socrates a familiarity with theatrical experience which uneasily combines cultural contempt for mass audiences with an acknowledgement of the capacity of theatre to exercise a forceful if insidious hold even over the minds of philosophical individuals within those audiences. Without succumbing to a naively autobiographical reading of the text, I think we are entitled to infer that through this Socratic persona Plato is drawing on, and in some sense perhaps sublimating, elements of his own experience. He is certainly using his dialogue to send a complicated message about the theatre to those contemporary readers who think of themselves as philosophers (Halliwell 2011: 179-207). This is not, and should not be, sufficient to redeem Plato in the eyes of theatre-lovers, but it does, I believe, underline the need to recognise in his work something more psychologically and culturally subtle than a sheer 'antitheatrical prejudice'.

If it is hard to get any closer than that to Plato himself via the Socratic fabric of his text, we may just be able to detect some echoes of his feelings about theatre in certain passages of Aristotle to

9 With my suggestion of 'active complicity' compare Harte 2010 on the joint responsibility shared by artists and audiences in *Republic* 10's critique of mimetic art as a whole; but her reading has a different overall orientation from mine: cf. Halliwell 2011: 179-207.

which I now turn. One thing that is beyond doubt is that on his arrival in Athens around 367 Aristotle found himself entering not only the most intensively theatrical culture in Greece but also a culture in which the nature of theatrical experience had itself become a subject of debate – a debate that must have included members of the Academy but need not have been confined to them. I want to reconsider in that light a passage from the final chapter of the *Poetics* which, though frequently cited, contains a somewhat knotty train of thought whose ramifications are not always well appreciated. The context here is Aristotle's treatment of the question whether epic or tragedy is the superior art. My translation omits parts of the passage in order to highlight the essential stages of the argument:

If the less vulgar art is superior, and if that is always the one performed for superior spectators, then clearly the art which enacts every detail [ἡ ἅπαντα μιμουμένη] is utterly vulgar: on the assumption that spectators do not notice anything unless the actor explicitly includes it, the performers use profuse bodily movement [πολλὴν κίνησιν] . . . Well, tragedy is of this kind, in a way which matches the earlier actors' opinion of their successors: Mynniscus called Callippides an "ape" for his exaggerated style of acting . . . and this relationship between the later and earlier actors is parallel to that between the art of tragedy as a whole and epic. Well, people say that epic is addressed to respectable spectators who have no need of bodily gestures [τῶν σχημάτων], while tragedy is for vulgar spectators . . . Now, in the first place, this is a complaint about the art of acting not of poetry, since a rhapsode too can strain for effect with visual signals [τοῖς σημείοις] . . . In the second place, not all bodily movement should be repudiated (any more than all dancing), only that of vulgar performers . . . Furthermore, tragedy can achieve its goal entirely without physical acting [καὶ ἄνευ κινήσεως], just like epic: reading can make its nature clear . . . Moreover, tragedy possesses all the resources of epic . . . and in addition, as no small part of its appeal, it has music and spectacle . . . Again, tragedy can achieve vividness both in reading and when staged. (Arist. *Po.* 26.1461b27-62a)

The manner in which Aristotle addresses the question of the relative merits of epic and tragedy evidently reflects a background

of debate in which genres were conceived, by some people at any rate, partly in terms of their conditions of performance, including their audiences. In typically analytical fashion, Aristotle attempts to separate out some of the strands of this debate and to clarify the cultural values at stake. He starts by paraphrasing other people's criticisms of the mimetic excesses of (certain) tragic performers. Such excesses are alleged to be a symptom of the lack of sophistication on the part of the audiences concerned: the subtext of the views in question is probably that the audiences of tragedy are much larger, more socially mixed, and less discriminating than those of epic recitals. Whoever exactly Aristotle has in mind, his defence of tragedy is intricate and incorporates three main lines of reasoning. First, it insists not only on a distinction between a poetic genre and its performers but also on the principle that there are intrinsic standards of performance in its own right. Secondly, it claims that *both* reading *and* performance can be effective ways of experiencing poetic drama. And, finally, it also appears to say (though some have thought the text corrupt, and I have bypassed the difficulty here) that uses of spectacle (or 'visuality', ὄψις), together with music, play "no small part" in heightening the pleasure of tragedy in the theatre.<sup>10</sup> Whatever else this amounts to, it is not the stance of someone supposedly "indifferent to . . . theatricality" (Green 2012: 56, cited earlier).

That point can be reinforced by observing, as is rarely done, that in the passage in question Aristotle is patently writing or lecturing for students whom he expects to have enough knowledge of, and interest in, theatre history to take the point of the anecdote about Mynniscus and Callippides. He also mentions by name, in parts of the passage omitted above, a further tragic actor, a rhapsode, and a singer – all of this superfluous unless he wishes his argument to be seen as underpinned by detailed familiarity with the performance practices of both drama and other genres. By the same token, Aristotle refuses to accept a blanket generalisation about the 'vulgarity' of theatre audiences. Even specialist scholars of the

10 The grammatically problematic reference to spectacle at 1462a16 is textually defended, most recently, by Tarán in Tarán and Gutas 2012: 302; see also Konstan 2013: 64-5.

*Poetics*, as well as some theatre historians, have not always grasped that the first half of this chapter of the treatise is more of a hypothetical paraphrase of others' views than a statement of premises Aristotle himself adopts without qualification.<sup>11</sup> A vital consideration here, which we will shortly find confirmed elsewhere too, is that Aristotle recognises that theatre audiences do not consist of spectators of only one kind, socially or culturally. Most importantly of all, Aristotle could hardly have brought himself to denigrate theatre audiences *per se*, since he too had 'been there', to adapt that Socratic remark in Plato's *Symposium* which I have used as the first part of the title of this paper. Indeed, he had been there on many occasions, a fact which sheer prejudice has often managed to overlook and which therefore now needs to be documented explicitly.

Contrary to a long-prevailing stereotype of Aristotle as untheatrically if not antitheatrically minded, we have telling evidence that he attended the theatre with some frequency in Athens and keenly appreciated the virtues of good actors (and no doubt dancers and musicians as well: see hints of this in the passage quoted above). One of the two prime pieces of this evidence is found in a passage from book 3 of the *Rhetoric* where, speaking of stylistic enhancement in oratory, Aristotle states:

So this should be done unobtrusively, giving an impression of natural rather than artificial speech. The natural is persuasive, while the artificial is the opposite: artifice arouses people's suspicion of a concealed purpose . . . An analogy is the difference between the voice of Theodorus and the voices of other actors: his seems to belong to the character speaking, while theirs seem borrowed. (*Rh.* 3.2, 1404b18-24)

11 See e.g. Csapo 2010: 117-20, who appears to understand the whole passage in terms of "what Aristotle complains about" (119). For helpful analysis of competing views of Aristotle's general position regarding theatrical performance in the *Poetics*, see Sifakis 2013; cf. Konstan 2013: 63-9. Taplin (forthcoming) rightly emphasises that Aristotle's attitudes in this area were influenced by the strong element of competition (between producers and sponsors as well as actors) in Greek theatrical productions, but he prejudices the evidence in attributing to Aristotle the thesis that tragedy was "better" without production.

Several things are revealing about this obiter dictum, an oblique comparison highly characteristic of Aristotle's habits of thought.<sup>12</sup> Theodorus, as we know from both literary and documentary evidence, was one of the most successful tragic actors of the second quarter of the fourth century.<sup>13</sup> Because this reference to him employs verbs in the 'present perfect' tense (πέπονθε, ἔοικεν), Walter Burkert inferred that book 3 of the *Rhetoric* is a relatively early work, dating from Aristotle's first Athenian period.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, and crucially for my purposes, Aristotle couches his pronouncement on Theodorus in terms which imply *repeated* experiences of tragedy in the theatre (how else could such a confident affirmation of Theodorus's superiority to other actors be made?), as well as assuming, once again, that his students will have had a good deal of theatrical experience of their own and will be familiar with the performance values entailed by a comparative judgement on the merits of different actors.

Most important of all is that Aristotle here attests to his personal sensitivity to the highest quality of acting. He indicates unmistakably that Theodorus was his favourite tragic actor, at least during the period in question, in virtue of an ability to achieve a compelling authenticity of characterisation (which should not be equated with naive illusionism) through expertly controlled yet seemingly natural vocal qualities, an ability so refined that it even distinguished him from other professionals. What briefly opens up here is the specifically theatrical background to part of Aristotle's understanding of mimesis as the imaginatively absorbing simulation of possible human action. Good actors, he is acknowledging and expecting his students to concur, can bring to life the mimetic

12 Sifakis (2002: 153-4; cf. 161-2) wrongly translates an analogy into a direct instance, thereby connecting the point about Theodorus's acting to the delivery of a particular style of poetic composition; Aristotle's praise is not limited in this way.

13 See O'Connor 1908: 100-2 (no. 230); Stephanis 1988: 210-12 (no. 1157). For the (remote) possibility that Theodorus wrote a manual on voice-training, see Cope 1877: III 316 (with reference to D. L. 2.103).

14 Burkert 1975: 67 (on the verbs). Burkert's chronological argument is hard to resist: certainly it is unjustifiable to date the passage in question to c. 330, as do Csapo and Slater 1995: 265-6.

significance of drama by their vocal and physical powers of enactment.<sup>15</sup> We can infer, accordingly, that one source of what became articulated as Aristotle's philosophical account of mimesis in the *Poetics* was his own conscious appreciation of performance standards such as those achieved by Theodorus. Not only has Aristotle formed a clear judgement of Theodorus's artistry, he has evidently reflected on repeated experiences in the theatre which have given rise to that judgement.<sup>16</sup> To adapt what Socrates says in *Republic* book 10 to the present case, we can conclude that Aristotle must have become aware in himself of a kind of psychological 'surrender' not only to the dramatic power of tragic plays but also to the performance of those plays by outstanding actors.

A number of other passages in the *Rhetoric* confirm and fill out the conception of acting which underlies the remark on Theodorus. I have space here only to deal with them concisely, leaving aside a number of issues which are not of direct relevance to my present argument. In the first of these passages, at *Rh.* 3.1, 1403b27-4a16, Aristotle links *hupokrisis* (vocal 'delivery' in both theatrical acting and rhetoric) to the expression of emotion. He also makes *hupokrisis* a matter more of nature than of art, thus rendering his later judgement on Theodorus all the more complex in its implications: the actor must possess a *natural* ability to use *artifice* in a way which is made to *seem natural*. This same passage of the *Rhetoric* is most often cited for its negative comment on how contemporary actors exercise greater power in the theatre than playwrights, together with the use of this point as an analogy to rhetorical abuse of emotional delivery for politically undesirable ends. But this negative aspect should not be allowed to obscure what Aristotle recognises as the legitimacy of good theat-

15 For vocal mimesis in its own right, note Aristotle's passing referent to it in his preliminary taxonomy at *Po.* 1.1447a20, together with the Platonic reference to the same thing at *R.* 3.393c.

16 It goes without saying that Athenians must have been pondering the standards of good acting long before Aristotle's day, not least because official prizes were instituted for tragic actors at the City Dionysia and Lenaea festivals in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century (and for comic actors at the Lenaea from not much later); see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 124-5. For some general reflections on actors' voices in the Athenian theatre, see Vetta 1995.

rical *hupokrisis* and the capacity of actors and playwrights to serve the same end.

A later passage in book 3, *Rh.* 3.12, 1413b9-27, gives that positive consideration salience. Here Aristotle posits a kind of symbiosis between theatrical acting and what he calls the 'debating style' of writing, λέξις ἀγωνιστική (contrasted with the 'writerly style', λέξις γραφική). He indicates that such writing, together with its embodied realisation through *hupokrisis*, has two varieties, suitable respectively for the expression of character or emotion. The adjectives used here, ἠθική and παθητική, are applied in the *Poetics* to whole classes or sub-types of tragedy. It is significant that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle gives these terms a fine-grained stylistic sense by linking them to the texture of particular kinds of writing, but writing which requires the actor's (or orator's) skilful delivery for its full potential to be effected: "that is indeed why actors seek out plays written in this style and playwrights seek actors who can project such qualities" (1413b10-12). He also permits expression of character and emotion to encompass a wide range of possible registers, hence his inclusion of examples from comedy. It is in this last connection that we meet Aristotle's particular partiality for the comic actor Philemon. *À propos* asyndeton and repetition as stylistic features suitable for dramatic delivery, Aristotle states:

It is necessary to have variation when repeating the same thing, which prepares the ground, as it were, for acting . . . For example, what Philemon the actor used to do in Anaxandrides' *Old Men's Madness* (Γεροντομανία) when uttering the words 'Rhadamanthys and Palamedes' . . . and also in the prologue of *The Pious* [sc. when repeating the pronoun] 'I'. (*Rh.* 3.12, 1413b21-7)

Just as in the case of Theodorus, so here too we have clear traces of Aristotle's own experiences in the theatre on multiple occasions, as underlined by the imperfect verb ἐποίει, 'used to do', though the substance of the texts alluded to (Anaxandrides frs 10 and 13 K.-A.) remains necessarily uncertain.<sup>17</sup> Since Philemon

<sup>17</sup> It is normal, e.g. Burkert 1975: 70, followed by Rapp 2002: II 933, to assume that Aristotle could only have seen each play in a single performance,



was active from the 370s to 340s (Millis and Olson 2012: 201), we are again dealing with events which belong to Aristotle's first Athenian period, between 367 and 347. Furthermore and very remarkably, Aristotle has specific recollections of how Philemon repeated particular phrases and words, even the first-person pronoun ἐγώ, in particular passages of Anaxandrides – recollections which we can well imagine him filling out (even, in a sense, re-enacting) in the course of his oral teaching. To retain such details, and to have them available as examples to illustrate a discussion which lays great weight on the intimate link between certain kinds of language and the vocal artistry of actors, is unequivocal testimony to an acute sensibility and a connoisseurship of fine acting on Aristotle's part.

In one further passage of the *Rhetoric*, this one from book 2, we can find an indication that Aristotle's conception of *hupokrisis* was not wholly limited to vocal qualities, even though the other passages so far considered certainly emphasise that side of things.

Since sufferings which seem close at hand arouse pity, . . . it follows that speakers who elaborate [συναπεργαζομένους] with gestures, inflections of voice, clothing, and, in general, with delivery, increase the arousal of pity: they make the calamity seem close by bringing it before the mind's eye either as imminent or as having just taken place. (*Rh.* 2.8, 1386a28-34)

Although Aristotle is here talking in the first instance about oratorical delivery, that makes the implications of what he says for theatrical *hupokrisis* all the more striking, since actors had far greater scope for gesture, manipulation of voice, use of garments (and other props) than orators had. Also to be noted here is the verb συναπεργάζεσθαι, to 'elaborate', 'complete', or 'flesh out'. This term occurs in only one other passage of the Aristotelian corpus and that happens to be in chapter 17 of the *Poetics*, where, in a double use of this same verb (1455a22-3 and 30), the tragic poet is advised, in the process of composition, to flesh out his plot

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but we cannot rule out the possibility that Aristotle had seen them more than once, perhaps including stagings at the Rural Dionysia. On the uncertain details of the Anaxandrides passages in question, see Millis 2015: 73-7 and 87.

with the verbal texture (*lexis*) of his verses and at the same time, for the sake of imaginative veracity, to complement his writing with the hypothetical physical gestures (*σχήματα*) of the characters – that is, by clear implication, gestures and movements of the kind he would expect actors to incorporate in the performance of their roles. The compositional method envisaged here may remind us of the Agathon scene in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* – a scene in which, with rich comic *double entendre*, Agathon advances a miniature theory of creative imagination that comes close to blurring the roles of playwright and actor (148-56). Aristotle is doing something similar in *Poetics* 17, and his view matches up with the various remarks on *hupokrisis* which I have adduced from the *Rhetoric*.<sup>18</sup>

It is the *Rhetoric* above all, then, which shows Aristotle to have possessed a rich stock of personal theatrical experience to draw on, including detailed recollection of the nuances of individual actors in specific roles, even, indeed, their enunciation of particular words. It is my contention that we can observe here a conception of the function and value of the actor's artistry which supplements and complements, rather than clashing with, the theory of dramatic poetry formulated in the *Poetics*. It is no accident that two of the passages cited above, *Rhetoric* 2.8, 1386a34 and *Poetics* 17.1455a23, both contain the idea of 'bringing things before the mind's eye' (*πρὸ ὀμμάτων ποιεῖν/τίθεσθαι*): the second of these cases refers to the work of the poet (but in his capacity as anticipator of the actor's work), the other to that of the orator (but in the aspect of his art, *hupokrisis*, which parallels that of the actor). That phrase carries with it an idea of imaginative projection; the same phrase is in fact used in connection with *phantasia* in the *De anima* (3.3, 427b18-19). It is apparent from all the passages of the *Rhetoric* I have considered that Aristotle takes *hupokrisis* to be a means of activating imagination in a particularly concentrated way: we can recall here the

18 For a fuller reading of the passages from *Poetics* 17 and *Rhetoric* 2.8 quoted in my text from the point of view of Aristotle's understanding of emotional expression, see Halliwell 2017: 119-22; on *Poetics* 17 see also Sifakis 2009, which I had previously overlooked.

comment on Theodorus, “his voice seems to belong to the character speaking”, that is, to be a wholly convincing vocal embodiment of the latter. But as I have argued more fully elsewhere (Halliwell 2003), this also helps to explain why, on Aristotle’s premises, theatrical performance, for all its expressive power, does not count as an essential requirement of drama *qua* poetry, which constitutes the perspective adopted in the *Poetics*. If responding to poetry is ultimately an imaginative process – a process which contains both cognitive and emotional components, but applied to the simulated worlds produced by mimesis – then the material presence of actors, with all the other apparatus of staging, cannot be indispensable for the communication of what poetry has to offer the mind. But that point of theoretical principle is a world away from the supposed lack of sensitivity to the values of theatrical performance of which many have been so quick to accuse Aristotle. On the contrary, an Aristotelian has ample motivation to go to the theatre, especially when the likes of Theodorus and Philemon are performing.

I suggested earlier that in the attitudes to theatre found in some passages of Plato we can trace a tension between the social profile and the psychology of audiences. I would like now, briefly and in conclusion, to say something about how Aristotle stands in relation to Plato in this regard. A key point of orientation is provided by a difficult section in the last book of the *Politics* where Aristotle is discussing the uses of different kinds of melodic systems (*harmoniai*) in music, including those capable of producing an emotional *katharsis*:

So we must allow competitive performers who practise music for the theatre to use such tunings and such melodies [i.e. those expressive of action (πρακτικός) and those with emotionally exciting effects (ἐνθουσιαστικός), including *katharsis*]. And since spectators are of two kinds, namely the free and educated on the one hand, and on the other the vulgar crowds of banausic workers, day-labourers, and the like, the latter too must be allowed to watch competitions and displays for their relaxation. (*Pol.* 8, 1342a16-22)

Immediately after this quotation Aristotle goes on to say that the

vulgar, banausic class of spectators must be allowed to listen to 'deviant', highly coloured types of music which suit the warped conditions of their souls. It seems *prima facie* obvious that he is describing different sorts of theatrical music (and, more generally, different 'shows') for the two classes of spectators. This does not, however, entitle us to convert Aristotle's position into a claim that *actual* audiences of tragedy and comedy are confined to the "free and educated" as opposed to the banausic and vulgar. The train of thought in *Politics* 8.7 (leaving aside some acutely uncertain details) requires "theatrical music" (θεατρικὴ μουσικὴ) to include, without being restricted to, the music of drama. When Aristotle proceeds to split spectators into two fundamentally contrasting types, and to suggest that there are some kinds of music and performance which best suit the vulgar type (φορτικός), he foregrounds his normative point in a way which overrides the obvious possibility that in existing cultural circumstances the two types of spectator may be found in the same audience on some occasions. This reading of the passage makes it easier to reconcile it with chapter 26 of the *Poetics*, which was discussed earlier. We saw there that Aristotle hypothetically considers a complaint made in some quarters that the audience of tragedy itself might be thought (predominantly) vulgar (φορτικός), though I have argued that Aristotle himself does not, and cannot afford to, accept that complaint without qualification.

If my (highly compressed) interpretation is on the right lines, I think we can see Aristotle struggling with what had also been a problem for Plato, or, rather, what was *still* a problem for Plato, if *Politics* 8 belongs, as seems likely, to Aristotle's first Athenian period: namely, the relationship between the sociology and the psychology of theatre. The subtext of *Politics* 8.7 is that the music which befits the best kinds of theatre is suitable for audiences of "the free and educated" (where 'free' is itself, of course, not a legal but a normative cultural category): audiences of the kind to which Aristotle himself, as we have seen, was happy to belong. Those who lead utterly banausic, 'uneducated' lives are taken to have warped souls which find the most appropriate pleasure in debased kinds of music. This is also the point of the slightly earlier passage at *Pol.* 8.6, 1341b10-16, where Aristotle talks of musical

performers themselves becoming debased by catering for the vulgar tastes of certain audiences. There is no doubt that the discussion of music in *Politics* 8 reflects what Peter Wilson has called the “strong ideological barrier between the Athenian [sc. élite] and the *aulos*” (Wilson 2002: 45, cf. Wilson 2000: 130-1), as well as a related *hauteur* towards professional musicians. But what interests me here is that these social-cum-ideological prejudices, strong though they are, do not occlude a recognition of the psychological power of music in general, including music for the *aulos*. It is above all to the ‘melodies of Olympus’ for the *aulos* that Aristotle appeals, early in his discussion of music, in order to give force to his claim that music affects our characters and souls. Everyone agrees, he asserts, that these melodies “make our souls ecstatic, and such ecstasy is an affect of the character of our soul. Moreover, when listening to mimetic works [i.e. melic poetry] everyone feels an emotionally sympathetic response, even apart from the words, through the rhythms and melodies themselves”.<sup>19</sup> When, in this same context (1340a8), Aristotle uses a first-person plural to assert it as self-evident that in listening to music “we take on certain qualities” (γίγνόμεθα ποιοί τινες), his stance is not wholly unlike those first-person plurals in *Republic* book 10, discussed earlier in this paper, where Socrates concedes the psychological power of what happens to the souls of “even the best of us” in the tragic theatre. And, after all, how could Aristotle demote the *aulos* entirely to the realms of debased music when its use was embedded in the theatre of tragedy and comedy – a theatre he had often experienced appreciatively himself (including its music: cf. *Po.* 26.1462a15-17 again)?

There are formidable complexities and unresolved difficulties of interpretation in this part of *Politics* 8. But the passages already cited will, I think, support the contention that Aristotle’s attitudes to theatre audiences betray an element of instability that arises from an interplay between social and psychological con-

19 *Pol.* 8.5, 1340a9-14: my translation ‘even apart from the words’ takes χωρίς in Aristotle’s Greek as here adverbial and follows Schütrumpf 2005: 614-15 in reading καὶ χωρίς <διὰ> τῶν ῥυθμῶν κτλ.; cf. Halliwell 2002: 244; Ford 2004: 320-4.

siderations. Even in the *Poetics* we can discern some tensions in Aristotle's views. Within the space of just a few lines in chapter 13 (1453a27-35), he adduces the evidence of audience responses (responses, one should note, that he can only have observed for himself first hand) in connection with two related points, one positive and one negative: first, as testimony to the theatrical potency of Euripidean plays which end in misfortune, and, secondly, to explain a mistaken preference for tragedies which have a double dénouement with opposite outcomes for good and bad characters. Evidently these are not the same audiences – or, rather, not the same audiences on the same occasions. In both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle assumes a kind of dialectic between performances and audiences: each can exercise some influence over the other. In the final analysis, however, the implications of this dialectic for the experiences of individuals within various kinds of audiences remain far from obvious and open to continuing debate. And that uncertainty cannot have been lost on Aristotle when he argued with his friends in the Academy about what it might mean for philosophers to go to the theatre.

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