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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aristophanes' *Frogs* and reading culture in Athens

Thomas A. Schmitz

Bonn University
Email: thomas.schmitz@uni-bonn.de

Abstract

Aristophanes' *Frogs*, first performed in 405 BCE, is an important milestone in Greek cultural history. The play is evidence of the beginnings of the establishment of a literary canon in Athens. The paper shows that the deaths of Euripides and Sophocles, in combination with the emergence of a reading culture, marked a break in the ways in which tragedy was perceived in Athens. It makes use of Jan Assmann's concept of a transition from ritual to textual continuity to explore this capital step in the process of the canonization of 'classical' tragedy that would arrive at its fulfilment in the course of the fourth century BCE.

Keywords: comedy; tragedy; canonization; reading culture

I. Introduction

The dramatic action in Aristophanes' *Frogs* is triggered by a reader, one of the first readers of a literary text in Western history. As Dionysus explains to Herakles, reading Euripides' *Andromeda* made him yearn for the poet, who had died a few months earlier:

> καὶ δῆτ᾽ ἐπὶ τῆς νεὼς ἀναγιγνώσκοντί μοι
> τὴν Ἀνδρομέδαν πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν ἐξαίφνης πόθος
> τὴν καρδίαν ἐπάταξε πῶς οἴει σφόδρα.[1]

> And anyway, on the ship I was reading *Andromeda* to myself, and suddenly, my heart was struck with a longing, you can't imagine how hard. (*Ran.* 52–54)

Some interpreters have argued that Aristophanes' depiction of Dionysus in the guise of an Athenian sailor, reading a book roll during a lull in the military action, was meant to surprise and amuse the audience. Leonard Woodbury thinks that reading aboard a ship is 'as little appropriate as the combination of a lion-skin with a saffron dress';[2] no Athenian could have dreamed of reading a tragedy because 'there is little evidence elsewhere that encourages us to believe in a practice of literacy that is so refined or so widespread'.[3]

Several scholars have expressed their agreement with Woodbury's argument.[4] However, I will argue that it flies in the face of the text of *Frogs* and of what we know

[1] Aristophanes' text is quoted from the OCT by N.G. Wilson (2007); translations are from Sommerstein (1996).
[2] Woodbury (1976) 351 = (1991) 264.
[3] Woodbury (1976) 349 = (1991) 263.
[4] See, for example, Burns (1981) 380–81; Thomas (1989) 19–20; Slater (1996) 103–04. Ford (2003) 30–34 is carefully balanced; Harriott (1962) appears to argue along similar lines to Woodbury. I should note that Woodbury presents a more nuanced view in Woodbury (1986) = (1991) 454–71.

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about reading in fifth-century Athens. I started this article with a reference to Woodbury's view not because of some ill-conceived pleasure in showing up a respected colleague. Rather, I want to point out that his misinterpretation can be seen as a failure to grasp just how important reading and book culture are for our understanding of Aristophanes' play and that the full extent of this aspect has not yet been appreciated. In this article, I want to pursue the implications of an emerging reading culture for our understanding of the *Frogs*. In order to explore the ramifications of reading for interpreting the play, I will make use of Jan Assmann's model of 'cultural memory',[5] which helps us understand processes of canonization and memorization.

In his study, Assmann explores the 'connection between [the] themes of memory (or reference to the past), identity (or political imagination), and cultural continuity (or the formation of tradition)'.[6] Drawing on the work of predecessors such as Maurice Halbwachs, Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory 'is a matter of institutionalized mnemotechnics'.[7] As such, it relies on specific actors and social groups, on media and 'mythomotors', on rituals and texts for creating shared memories and thus social identity. One moment in history that is particularly important for the emergence of such shared memories is the transition from 'ritual to textual continuity', which for Assmann is intimately connected with processes of canonization, the establishment of a (classical) tradition and the development of methodologies for editing, preserving and interpreting these canonical texts. Assmann studies four specific historical cases to substantiate his hypotheses about the development of cultural memory: written culture in ancient Egypt, the 'invention of religion' in Israel, the 'theologization' of history and justice in Mesopotamia and the consequences of literacy in Greece. The periods in the intellectual history of Greece that Assmann examines most closely are the establishment of a Panhellenic memory in the Homeric epics and the canonization of the Homeric texts in the library of Alexandria. Assmann also looks (briefly) at Plato's famous critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*,[8] but Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE is not the focus of his chapter on Greece. In this contribution, I will make use of Assmann's methodology to explore important aspects of this period.

In particular, I will argue that Aristophanes' comedy is an important witness for a pivotal moment in Greek intellectual history. I will begin by providing a brief recapitulation of the importance of reading and writing within *Frogs* itself (section II) and of the spread of literacy and the emergence of a book market towards the end of the fifth century BCE (section III). I will argue that the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides within a few months of each other were perceived as marking an important turning point for the development of Athenian tragedy and thus contributed to a sense of nostalgia elicited by the war; this in turn encouraged contemporaries to look back at the recent past as a 'golden age' and the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the classical period of tragedy (section V). In order to understand the significance of these developments for Aristophanes' *Frogs*, we must first take a brief look at some potential issues in the performance and composition of the play and the earliest stages of its textual transmission (section VI). Section VII explores the importance of written texts for the establishment of the canon of what was to become classical tragedy; section VIII brings these strands together and demonstrates that Assmann's concepts and methodology help us understand the important place Aristophanes' play holds in this process of canonization.

[5] See Assmann (2011); the original German version was published in 1992.
[6] Assman (2011) 2.
[7] Assman (2011) 37.
[8] Assman (2011) 240.

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II. Readings and readers in the *Frogs*

The first argument against Woodbury's interpretation is the observation that ll. 52–53 is not the only passage in the *Frogs* in which books, reading and writing are prominent. Taken together, the following passages demonstrate that reading literature (in particular, tragedy) and writing were concepts familiar to the audience of Aristophanes' comedy and would not have appeared incongruous or surprising:[9]

(1) In ll. 1109–14, the chorus addresses Euripides and Aeschylus: they should not be afraid that the audience might lack the necessary sophistication to follow the finer points of literary criticism; 'they're old campaigners, and every one of them has a book' (ἐστρατευμένοι γάρ εἰσι, | βιβλίον τ' ἔχων ἕκαστος, 1114–15). It is not quite clear which sort of book every member of the audience is supposed to have, and the line has been variously interpreted.[10] The wording seems deliberately vague, and Alan H. Sommerstein is probably right in his note on the passage: 'the chorus are saying, with two doses of comic exaggeration, that (i) every Athenian now owns at least one book and (ii) it follows that every Athenian is now intellectually sophisticated'.[11] The line cannot be taken as evidence that the living room of each Athenian household held an impressive collection of classical texts,[12] but even if we allow for comic exaggeration, it demonstrates books becoming common by the time of the performance of our play.

(2) The connection of books with intellectual sophistication is also maintained in the long 'weighing scene' (1364–1410), in which Aeschylus consistently adduces lines that are 'weightier' than the ones spoken by Euripides. At the end of the scene, Aeschylus contemptuously provokes his opponent: 'Let *him* climb on to the scales and sit there: himself, his children, his wife, Cephisophon, and he can take his books with him too' (ἀλλ' εἰς τὸν σταθμὸν | αὐτός, τὰ παιδί', ἡ γυνή, Κηφισοφῶν, | ἐμβὰς καθήσθω, ξυλλαβὼν τὰ βιβλία, 1407–09). In the competition between the two poets, Aeschylus is consistently depicted as manly, majestic and aloof, as opposed to the crafty, subtle and 'democratic' Euripides. Owning an entire library of books (βιβλία) is part of the depiction of Euripides as being too clever for his own good; the character Euripides himself proudly mentions that he dosed the Athenian public 'with chatter-juice strained off from books' (χυλὸν … στωμυλμάτων ἀπὸ βιβλίων ἀπηθῶν, 943). This bookishness is thus part of the characterization of Euripides as a sophisticated, 'modern' poet.[13]

(3) In ll. 145–51, Herakles provides a description of the path to Hades: after a number of monstrous and frightening beasts, Dionysus will come upon 'a vast sea of mud and ever-flowing dung', in which particularly heinous sinners are being punished. In a comic climax, the worst offenders are named last: everybody who 'copied out a speech by Morsimus' (ἢ Μορσίμου τις ῥῆσιν ἐξεγράψατο, 151). The tragedian Morsimus is the butt of several Aristophanic jokes (cf. *Eq.* 400–1; *Pax* 802). The

[9] See Zogg (2017); Lowe (1993); Nieddu (2004); Gelzer (2005) 102–05.

[10] Rogers (1919) gives a selection of older interpretations; Dover (1993) 34 n.68 provides a systematic overview of what the words could possibly mean. Certainty is impossible to obtain.

[11] Sommerstein (1996) 256.

[12] See Dover (1993) 34: the line says 'a "book", not "a library"'.

[13] Obryk (2014) 111 claims that 'Aristophanes presents a clash between two generations of poets who are members of two traditions: the oral and the literate one'. I would not go quite as far (as will become clear further on, Aeschylus is by no means seen as exclusively 'oral'), but overall, the observation is accurate. See also section III below for references to books of poetry in Euripides' tragedies.

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reference here must be to (hypothetical) admirers[14] who copy passages from his mediocre tragedies for their private consumption and learn them by heart for declamation at occasions such as symposia.[15] We would like to know more about the specifics of this literary note-taking:[16] should the audience imagine the anonymous admirer copying passages from the official manuscript in the city archive? Is he sitting in a rehearsal or performance, furiously scribbling away as the actors declaim? Or does he go to Morsimus' house and ask to see the poet's own manuscript (much as Dicaeopolis asks Euripides for props at *Ach.* 393–479)? Again, Aristophanes expects his public to supply these details; whatever the situation, having excerpts of poetry for one's personal use must have been familiar to the audience.[17] Moreover, the description shows that tragic texts had received a certain degree of autonomy from their original performance in the theatre of Dionysus: some people might now prefer to enjoy them on private occasions.[18]

III. The emergence of reading culture in the fifth century BCE

This brief summary has shown not only that reading and writing can be assumed to be household activities for Aristophanes' audience, but that Aristophanes saw them as connected with 'modernist' tendencies in Athenian culture. Dionysus reading the text of a tragedy is just one of a number of manifestations of the phenomenon in the text of the play. We obtain an even clearer picture of the growing importance of reading and writing in late fifth-century Athens when we look at the wider cultural context. This is not the place for a thorough and lengthy account of reading and writing in fifth-century Greece; I will merely remind readers of a few facts to demonstrate that between the Persian Wars and the first performance of the *Frogs*, reading and writing had spread with surprising speed.

The iconographic record is unequivocal:[19] from the beginning of the fifth century, we find numerous images of school scenes, readers and writers on vases. Two events, from the very beginning and the very end of the century, confirm that schools in which children learned to read and write had become ubiquitous even in smaller Greek communities. In his account of the Ionian Revolt, Herodotus relates that the island of Chios was struck by a

[14] Plato Com. *fr.* 136 could be spoken by an admirer of Morsimus, but the context is insufficient to be certain: 'Touch Morsimus just once with even the tip <of your finger>, and I will trample right back all over your Sthenelus' (ἅψαι μόνον σὺ κἂν ἄκρῳ τοῦ Μορσίμου, | ἵνα σου πατήσω τὸν Σθένελον μάλ' αὐτίκα); translation by I.C. Storey.

[15] Dover (1993) *ad loc.* refers to Pheidippides' recital at *Nub.* 1369–72 and Ephippus *fr.* 16.1–3 (several decades after Aristophanes' *Frogs*), where the speaker mentions learning tragedies and speeches (ῥήσεις) by heart. The middle ἐξεγράψατο does not imply the use of a specialized writer, as Sommerstein's translation 'had someone copy out' suggests (Henderson's Loeb also translates 'had someone copy out a speech by Morsimus'), but should rather be understood as meaning 'copied out for himself', as Tucker (1906) *ad loc.* points out; cf. *Av.* 982 ἐξεγραψάμην with Dunbar (1995) *ad loc.* and Pl. *Tht.* 143a–b ἐγραψάμην (Eucleides 'writes down for himself' the conversation between Socrates, Theaetetus and Theodorus). In the logic of Herakles' list, it is certainly better to envisage these 'sinners' as doing something themselves (like the ones striking their parents or cheating a prostitute) than having it done by somebody else.

[16] *Cf.* Henderson (2020) 44 with n.15.

[17] On the practice of taking excerpts, see Nieddu (2004) 351–56.

[18] Wallace (1995) focuses on the fourth century BCE, but has some good remarks on the beginning of this process in the latter half of the fifth century.

[19] See Immerwahr (1964) and Immerwahr (1973); on the Douris vase and the school scene depicted on it, see most recently Sider (2010).

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number of tragic disasters, which he interprets as (possible) divine portents. One of them involves a school:

> ἐν τῇ πόλι τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον χρόνον, ὀλίγον πρὸ τῆς ναυμαχίης, παισὶ γράμματα διδασκομένοισι ἐνέπεσε ἡ στέγη, ὥστε ἀπ' ἑκατὸν καὶ εἴκοσι παίδων εἷς μοῦνος ἀπέφυγε.
>
> [I]n their city about the same time, that is shortly before the sea-fight, as some children were being taught in school the roof fell in upon them, so that of a hundred and twenty children only one escaped. (Hdt. 6.27.1; tr. G.C. Macaulay)

Chios was a rich island; nevertheless, that 120 children were being taught to read and write (γράμματα διδασκομένοισι) is remarkable: this must have been a big school, and literacy must have been unexceptional in Chios at this point in time.[20] There is a similar account by a contemporary historiographer at the end of the century: in 413 BCE, a battalion of 1,300 Thracian mercenaries arrives in Athens. They are meant to sail to Sicily, with the Athenian general Demosthenes, as reinforcements for the Athenian army, but they arrive too late: Demosthenes has already left. Hence, they are sent back; the Athenian commander Diitrephes is told to inflict damage on enemy territory in passing, if possible, and he leads the mercenaries to the small town of Mycalessus, where they butcher not only women, men and children, but even cattle and draft animals, in a truly barbaric frenzy. Again, disaster strikes a school:

> καὶ ἐπιπεσόντες διδασκαλείῳ παίδων, ὅπερ μέγιστον ἦν αὐτόθι καὶ ἄρτι ἔτυχον οἱ παῖδες ἐσεληλυθότες, κατέκοψαν πάντας· καὶ ξυμφορὰ τῇ πόλει πάσῃ οὐδεμιᾶς ἥσσων μᾶλλον ἑτέρας ἀδόκητός τε ἐπέπεσεν αὕτη καὶ δεινή.
>
> [I]n particular they fell upon a boys' school, the largest in the town, which the children had just entered, and cut down all of them. And this was a calamity inferior to none that had ever fallen upon a whole city, and beyond any other unexpected and terrible. (Thuc. 7.29.5; tr. C.F. Smith, Loeb)

Thucydides does not provide the number of children who were killed in this massacre, but it is clear that it must have been a sizeable percentage of the boys in this rather small town. If this was the largest school in town, it follows that there must have been at least one more (two more, if we press the use of the superlative: if there had been only two, Thucydides would have used μεῖζον). By the end of the fifth century BCE, even a backwater such as Mycalessus could be expected to provide an education for a large part of its (male) children.[21]

The very genre of historiography is connected with the advent of writing. As is well known, Hecataeus of Miletus mixes verbs denoting oral utterance and writing in the first sentence of his work (Ἑκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται· τάδε γράφω, ὥς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθέα

[20] The mistrust of these accounts shown by Harris (1989) 57–59 seems unjustified to me and is only a form of special pleading against evidence that does not support his argument.

[21] As is still the case today, the combination of school children and natural or man-made disaster elicits a strong reaction in most readers. The two accounts mentioned above have the advantage of being provided by contemporaries. I add here a very brief summary of two similar narratives in later writers, which can always be suspected of seeing fifth-century Greece through the lens of their own culture, thus possibly giving a misleading impression. Plutarch, in *Themistocles* 10.5, commends the Troizenians who took in the wives and children of the Athenians when they had to leave their city in 480 BCE, before the battle of Salamis, for not only providing food and shelter, but also covering the wages for their teachers (ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν διδασκάλοις τελεῖν μισθούς). At the beginning of the fifth century BCE, the Olympic boxer Cleomedes lost his mind because he was deprived of victory by a referee's decision, destroyed a school in Astypalaea and killed 60 children in it (Paus. 6.9.6; Plut. *Rom.* 28.5–6).

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εἶναι, 1 F 1a *FGrH*).[22] Herodotus also uses both verbs of speaking and writing when he refers to his own work. Yet it is clear that the text itself was written and that Herodotus expected it to be read; as Wolfgang Rösler states: 'Herodotus composed the *Histories* for future readers, with a clear-cut concept and in a continuous process of writing'.[23] Thucydides inserts references to his writing process into his historical account at regular intervals.

I do not intend to discuss in depth the worn-out topic of the number and percentage of Athenians who were literate. If we want to stay in the theatre of Dionysus: a number of passages presuppose at least some degree of literacy among its spectators. Scenes in (lost) tragedies of Euripides (from his *Theseus*, *fr.* 382), Agathon (*Telephus*, *fr.* 4) and Theodectes (*fr.* 6) show illiterate characters describing the shapes of letters; they depend on the audience's ability to recognize these letters and reconstruct the written words.[24] References to written documents (such as letters, collections of oracles or testaments) [25] and metaphors taken from writing[26] are ubiquitous both in tragedy and comedy and also presuppose familiarity with these types of objects. The scene *Thesm.* 765–84, which has Euripides' In-law write on stage and complain about the difficulty of tracing the letter *rho*, only makes sense if most of the public know what this letter looks like.

The problem of whether legal and democratic proceedings in Athens presupposed literacy at all, and if so, whether we can ascertain the level of literacy needed to function as a citizen, is a vexed question. Recent studies seem to suggest that the demands on citizens became more and more pronounced over the course of the fifth century; by the time of the first performance of the *Frogs*, average citizens could be expected to have more than mere basic literacy.[27] The last decades of the fifth century also saw the emergence of professional speechwriters (λογογράφοι): clients would receive written copies of these speeches and learn them by heart.[28] The practice had become so prevalent that in the first half of the fourth century BCE the sophist Alcidamas emphasizes that speechwriters are most successful when they avoid the impression of written texts (*fr.* 15.13: τότε κάλλιστα γράφειν δοκοῦσιν, ὅταν ἥκιστα γεγραμμένοις ὁμοίους πορίσωνται λόγους): jurors were aware that many litigants had paid a speechwriter and were in fact declaiming written texts, hence avoiding this suspicion would make their pleas appear more spontaneous and authentic.[29]

It is certainly true that the clients of these speechwriters tended to be wealthy individuals: they were more often involved in litigation; they had the means to pay a professional for a persuasive speech. It would thus be unwise to use the emergence of professional speechwriting as evidence that every Athenian citizen or even a large majority was able to read fluently. Nevertheless, we have enough documents demonstrating that literacy was not restricted to a tiny social elite. A particularly striking example is the ostrakon from the Athenian Agora, dated to the middle of the sixth

[22] There is thorough discussion of the relation between literacy and the beginnings of historiography in Bertelli (2001) and Fowler (2001).

[23] Rösler (2002) 90.

[24] See Blanck (1992) 25–26 and Slater (2002). I add, somewhat hesitantly, Callias' *Letter Tragedy*. We do not know enough about the text, its genre, its date or its mechanism to move beyond speculation, but it may have been a comedy that introduced similar playful descriptions of letters; see Rosen (1999); Ruijgh (2001) and Smith (2003) (who is sceptical about the conclusions we can infer from the evidence).

[25] Written documents play central roles in Sophocles' *Trach.* or Euripides' *Hipp.* and *IT*, to mention only a few examples; on writing in the tragedians, see Easterling (1985) 3–6. For comedy, see, for example, the extended joke on written collections of oracles with the repeated punchline λαβὲ τὸ βυβλίον in *Birds* 974–89.

[26] For examples, see Aeschylus, *Supp.* 179 with Johansen and Whittle (1980) *ad loc.*; for Near Eastern antecedents, *cf.* West (1997) 560–62.

[27] See Pébarthe (2006) and Missiou (2011); Hedrick (1994) and Thomas (2009) are more sceptical. The evidence collected in Morgan (1999) mostly concerns the earlier half of the fourth century BCE.

[28] See Edwards (2000) for convincing arguments that Antiphon started this line of business in the 430s or 420s. On logographers and writing, see further Todd (1993) 95 and Usher (1976).

[29] On this passage in Alcidamas, see Gagarin (1994) 60–62.

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century BCE, in which an unknown (probably Megarian) writer asks an Athenian named Thamneus (if this restoration of the name is correct) to 'put the saw under the threshold of the garden gate'.[30] These are not members of an aristocratic elite, but simple citizens, farmers or craftsmen who used writing in their everyday business without hesitation.[31]

As more and more people were able to read, it will come as no surprise that a book market developed. Our evidence is mainly Athenian, but as we will see, books were also exported to other parts of the Greek world. Our earliest testimonies are found in the comic poets. The word βιβλιοπώλης 'book-seller' occurs first in comic fragments.[32] In one of his plays, Eupolis (who died around five years before the first performance of the *Frogs*) mentions a place 'where books are sold' (οὗ τὰ βυβλί' ὤνια, *fr.* 327).[33] This must have been a special section of the marketplace, as is confirmed by the famous passage in Plato's *Apology*, set in 399 BCE, in which Socrates mentions that one can buy Anaxagoras' book 'for one drachma in the orchestra' (ἔξεστιν ἐνίοτε εἰ πάνυ πολλοῦ δραχμῆς ἐκ τῆς ὀρχήστρας πριαμένοις Σωκράτους καταγελᾶν, 26d–e). As we see, Plato considers it safe to assume that all jurors are literate: to imagine that they know nothing about books (οἴει αὐτοὺς ἀπείρους γραμμάτων) would be a sign of 'contempt' (καταφρονεῖς τῶνδε).[34] I see no reason for assuming that reading a (short) philosophical treatise should be more commonplace than reading a tragedy.

At around the same time, Xenophon provides a fascinating testimony about the book trade: when he and the Greek mercenaries march home after their unsuccessful campaign against the Persian king, they reach Salmydessus on the southwest corner of the Black Sea. The area is infamous for its violent storms.[35] Thracian wreckers have divided up the coast and plunder the ships that run ashore, but the Greeks find numerous items on the beach, which we may assume the Thracians found to be of no use and had thus left behind:

> ἐνταῦθα ηὑρίσκοντο πολλαὶ μὲν κλῖναι, πολλὰ δὲ κιβώτια, πολλαὶ δὲ βίβλοι γεγραμμέναι, καὶ τἆλλα πολλὰ ὅσα ἐν ξυλίνοις τεύχεσι ναύκληροι ἄγουσιν.
>
> Here there were found great numbers of beds and boxes, quantities of written books, and an abundance of all the other articles that shipowners carry in wooden chests. (Xen. *An.* 7.5.14; tr. C.L. Brownson and J. Dillery, Loeb)

The Greeks reached this part of their itinerary in the winter of 400/399 BCE. A great number of Greek merchant ships sailed this part of the Black Sea to fetch grains and ore. We may assume that to make these trips more lucrative, ship owners looked for goods that they could export to the Black Sea area, most probably to the Greek colonies in this part of the world. The items that Xenophon mentions are typical luxury goods that required specialized craftsmen; they were manufactured in Athens and then shipped to remoter Greek settlements that lacked the capacity to produce such merchandise. As Leighton Reynolds and Nigel Wilson write: 'the inference seems inescapable that books were an article exported (from Athens?) to the cities of the Euxine coast as early as the year 399 B.C.'.[36]

[30] See Lang (1974) 8–9.

[31] When Aristophanes, in his *Knights* of 424, depicts the sausage-seller as an abhorrently vulgar character, he makes him say that he has no higher education, just rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing (οὐδὲ μουσικὴν ἐπίσταμαι | πλὴν γραμμάτων, καὶ ταῦτα μέντοι κακὰ κακῶς, 188–89). Eupolis, in his *Maricas* of 422, appears to have made a similar (or even identical) joke about Hyperbolus (*fr.* 208; *cf.* the reference to writing in *fr.* 192.14–19).

[32] Aristomenes *fr.* 10; Nicophon *fr.* 19. Both poets are younger contemporaries of Aristophanes.

[33] *Cf.* Olson (2014) 17 on this passage, with further references.

[34] The speaker of Cratinus *fr.* 128 (from his *Laws*) emphasizes that he does not know how to read and write. Is the audience supposed to laugh at this simpleton? Lack of context does not allow for any firm conclusions, but I would very tentatively suggest that this is the case, in the light of passages such as those quoted in n.31 above.

[35] *Cf.* Hipponax *fr.* 115.5–8 W; Strabo 1.3.4; Stronk (1986–1987).

[36] Reynolds and Wilson (1990) 244.

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Xenophon's description can also help resolve doubts about the nature of the books sold on the Athenian market. It seems possible that Athenian booksellers would not have taken the risky decision to have ready-made books available.[37] Instead, customers would request that specific texts be copied for them. The word βυβλί(α) in Eupolis *fr.* 327 (quoted above) can simply mean 'papyrus roll' and would not contradict this interpretation. However, Xenophon emphasizes that the rolls in the beached boxes are 'written books' (βίβλοι γεγραμμέναι). Unless we accept an ancient version of 'print-on-demand publishing', with readers in the Black Sea area placing orders for certain books, which were then copied in Athens and shipped to them, we must assume that the Athenian βιβλιοπῶλαι simply shipped copies of what they hoped would be interesting for potential customers (maybe Euripides' *Andromeda* was a bestseller?).[38] If this is the case, it is simpler to assume that the same mechanism was at work in their home market in Athens, where they probably had a good grasp of what the public wanted to buy and read. They were thus indeed 'booksellers' and not literary agents or brokers who had books copied on demand.

We have little knowledge about the nature of books that Athenian readers might have found attractive. The passage from Plato's *Apology* mentions a philosophical treatise by Anaxagoras; as Dionysus shows in the *Frogs*, Euripides' tragedies were available as well. The story that the Athenians confiscated and burnt all books written by Protagoras[39] (who died around 420 BCE) may be apocryphal, but Plato refers several times to his books (*Tht.* 152a; 162a, 162e; 166c, 171a; *Soph.* 232d–e), so they must have been available in Athens. Other sophists, such as Prodicus and Gorgias, and philosophers such as Zeno of Elea also circulated written texts of their works.[40] Plato Comicus (in his *Phaon*, performed 13 years after the *Frogs*) mentions a 'cookbook by Philoxenus' (Φιλοξένου … ὀψαρτυσία, *fr.* 189.4) that the speaker wants to 'read for himself' (διελθεῖν … πρὸς ἐμαυτόν). In what is probably our earliest reference to the recreational reading of literature, the chorus in Euripides' *Erectheus* (first performed in the late 420s) imagines retirement from the toils of war spent 'unfolding the voice of the tablets through which the wise are renowned' (δέλτων τ' ἀναπτύσσοιμι γῆρυν | ἃν σοφοὶ κλέονται, *fr.* 369.6–7), which is a metaphorical way of saying that they want to read the wisdom of ancient poets.[41] In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, when the nurse refers to the mythical and poetical tradition, she calls it 'the writings of the ancients' (ὅσοι μὲν οὖν γραφάς τε τῶν παλαιτέρων | ἔχουσιν αὐτοί τ' εἰσὶν ἐν μούσαις ἀεί, 451–52);[42] in l. 954 of the same play, Theseus refers to Orphic books. This evidence does not amount to much, but it shows that a variety of texts must have been available on the book market at the end of the fifth century BCE.[43]

IV. Reperforming and rewriting the *Frogs*?

The evidence we have seen so far demonstrates that Aristophanes and his audience were very much aware of cultural developments produced by the emergence of literacy and the availability of written texts. Not only does this show that the depiction of Dionysus reading a tragedy in the form of a book roll would have been compatible with their cultural

[37] I thank my colleagues who suggested this in discussions of this paper.

[38] But, on Black Sea trade and traders, see Lamont 2023; the evidence of letters suggests that sometimes merchants took orders for specific items.

[39] Diog. Laert. 9.52 = DK 80 A1; Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.63 = DK 80 A23; Hesychius in schol. on Pl. *Resp.* 600c = DK 80 A3.

[40] The evidence is collected and discussed in Thomas (2003) 164–73. It may be significant that in Aristophanes *fr.* 506, 'Prodicus' and 'a book' appear to be almost interchangeable (τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρ' ἢ βιβλίον διέφθορεν | ἢ Πρόδικος).

[41] Kuch (1993) 556–57.

[42] Barrett (1964) *ad loc.* shows that books, not paintings, are meant.

[43] See Thomas (2003) 170: 'Written texts were evidently available in increasing numbers by all kinds of intellectuals, poets, sophists, and philosophers'.

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expectations; it also means that for the playwright and his spectators, tragedy was undergoing momentous changes. These changes became especially clear when Euripides and Sophocles both died within a few months in 406/5. Their disappearance coincided with the availability of written texts and thus with a continuous presence of their works in the minds of Athenian audiences. There is certainly no necessary connection between these two events, but their coincidence made them more consequential. Aristophanes' *Frogs* can be read as a reaction to these important events. Unfortunately, some nagging questions about the composition of the play and the earliest stages of its textual transmission cast some doubt on this understanding of the *Frogs*. It will be necessary to provide a very brief summary of these problems.

The first issue concerns the unusual success of the *Frogs*: hypothesis I.3 informs us that 'the play was so admired because of its parabasis that it was reperformed, according to Dicaearchus' (οὕτω δὲ ἐθαυμάσθη τὸ δρᾶμα διὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ παράβασιν, ὥστε καὶ ἀνεδιδάχθη, ὥς φησι Δικαίαρχος); the *Life of Aristophanes* (T 1.35–9 Kassel–Austin) adds that the poet was 'crowned with a wreath of sacred olive' (ἐστεφανώθη θαλλῷ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἐλαίας). Sommerstein reminds us that these are not two independent testimonies, but can be traced back to the same source, Dicaearchus' book about musical competitions.[44] Scholars disagree about the date when this reperformance took place: some think that it 'received its second performance under the administration of the Lenaia of 405, before the same audience and the same judges';[45] others see a more considerable lapse of time before the reperformance and maintain that it must have occurred after democracy had been re-established, at the Dionysia of 400.[46] The most recent contributions to the debate opt for the year 404.[47] The date is relevant for our interpretation: if the play was reperformed right away, it is reasonable to assume that the text was unchanged. If, on the other hand, months or even years went by before this second performance, Aristophanes might have had time to rethink his text and introduce modifications reflecting a new political, social and even cultural situation. It is unlikely that the years between 405 and 400 would have brought about profound changes in Aristophanes' view of contemporary tragedy, but events since the first performance (the catastrophic end of the Peloponnesian War, the drastic changes in the political landscape under the Thirty, the ensuing civil war and the eventual re-establishment of democracy) may have reinforced the impression that Athens was undergoing a cultural revolution.

However, there are no clear indications that the text of the play was modified after its first performance. One scene that scholars have often identified as the most likely candidate for introducing second thoughts after the end of the war is the 'political' advice provided by Aeschylus and Euripides in ll. 1417–66. The passage was often felt to be lacking in coherence, hence critics assumed that two versions, both written by Aristophanes for the two performances, had become intertwined.[48] None of the suggested rearrangements has carried conviction.[49] The passage as a whole seems to be characterized by a pointed absurdity that renders futile all attempts to introduce logical coherence. Hence, some

[44] Sommerstein (1993) 461–62.

[45] Russo (1994) 203; *cf.* van Leeuwen (1896) viii.

[46] Allen (1932).

[47] Salviat (1989); Dover (1993) 73–75; Sommerstein (1993) ~ Sommerstein (1996) 21–22; MacDowell (1995) 297–99. On the difficult question of potential political implications of the decree (was Aristophanes an unwilling or even willing accessory to the destruction of democracy?), see Salviat (1989), Arnott (1991) and Hose (1995) 173–81; but *cf.* Rosen (2015), who is sceptical about the purported political reasons for this reperformance.

[48] The bibliography is immense; the table of scholarly suggestions at von Möllendorff (1996–1997) 142–43 gives a clear impression of the divergent opinions. Even the most recent editor of Aristophanes sounds somewhat dejected when he analyses the situation: Wilson (2007) 183.

[49] Erbse (1975) 57–58 rightly criticizes some proposals for combining rearrangements and the assumption of lacunae, pointing out that they go beyond what is methodologically sound.

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recent contributions have provided arguments to accept the transmitted text,[50] and I tend to agree: there is no clear indication that the text of the *Frogs* has been rewritten or edited for this supposed second performance. Both the parabasis and the advice given by Aeschylus and Euripides contain numerous items that would have been irrelevant or obsolete or even unattractive after 405. Occam's razor thus suggests that the transmitted text of the play is the text of the first performance in (more or less) its original state. The attitude towards reading and literacy is thus characteristic of the date of the first performance in 405 BCE.

The second issue is more important to my argument, and may be even more difficult to decide: is the death of Sophocles an integral part of the *Frogs*' plan, or did Aristophanes begin to write his play before he learned about his passing and have to adapt his text as he went? As is well known, Sophocles is mentioned three times in the *Frogs*: in ll. 76–82, Dionysus answers Herakles' question as to why he does not fetch Sophocles rather than Euripides from Hades; in ll. 786–94, a slave of Pluto explains what happened to the 'chair of tragedy', occupied by Aeschylus, when Sophocles arrived in Hades;[51] in ll. 1515–19, the parting Aeschylus entrusts the chair to Sophocles, whom he considers 'second in art' (σοφίᾳ κρίνω δεύτερον). Many modern readers have felt that these references do not do justice to Sophocles' successful career; in the 19th century, scholars first explained this surprising reticence by looking into Aristophanes' writing process:[52] they speculated that, when Sophocles died in 406, Aristophanes had already written most of the text of the *Frogs*. He had no time to rewrite the entire comedy; what he could do was insert a few lines here and there mentioning Sophocles. This would be an important limitation to my argument: if Aristophanes had indeed (all but) finished a first version of the *Frogs* before Sophocles passed away, my view that the deaths of Euripides and Sophocles were perceived as an important turning point in the development of Athenian tragedy and that this perception played a momentous role for the composition and the reception of the *Frogs* becomes less compelling.

However, scholars who advocate this view have failed to provide a convincing picture of what the structure of the play would have been before Aristophanes made the alleged changes in the late stages of composition. Despite claims that in many cases it is possible to determine exactly which lines have been added to the (almost) finished script, interpreters disagree on the place and extent of such insertions.[53] Their divergent speculations demonstrate that being inconsistent should not be explained by later insertions and rewriting, but should rather be understood as a regular prerogative of Aristophanean comedy.[54] Finding 'imperfect fits' between 'line n' and 'line $n + 1$'[55] and thus discovering potential layers of Aristophanes' writing process may be an entertaining parlour game, but it will not provide reliable results. If Aristophanes was really surprised by the death, in times of war and hardship, of a poet who was no less than 90 years old, and if he had to adapt his script when this 'unexpected' event took place, this adaptation was not a matter of merely adding a few lines here and a couple of remarks there.[56] The exact date of

[50] See especially von Möllendorff (1996–1997) 142–49, Willi (2002) 17–18.

[51] Our understanding of the passage is bedevilled by the difficulty of determining the referent of ἐκεῖνος in line 788; see the exchange of arguments in Stevens (1955), Kells (1964) and Stevens (1966). Wilson (2007) 172 is pessimistic: 'I doubt if it is possible to solve this puzzle'.

[52] See Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1895) 1.2–3 and van Leeuwen (1896) vi–vii.

[53] See the latest contributions, Weißenberger (2008) and Sommerstein (2012) 115–16; there is a good summary of scholarly contributions up to 1960 in Russo (1961) 97–99.

[54] See the classical treatment in Süss (1954) and Dover (1993) 8–9.

[55] Sommerstein (2012) 115–16.

[56] This becomes clear when one looks at the attempt to distinguish between two plans for the *Frogs* in Drexler (1927): almost every part of the text remains untouched; in the end, it becomes clear that the hypothetical rewriting of an earlier version encompassed almost every aspect of the drama.

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Sophocles' death is far from certain;[57] we have no clear idea of when Aristophanes would have finished and submitted his script of *Frogs* to have it rehearsed by the chorus and the actors and when he would have had time and opportunity to make changes to it.

It makes more sense, then, to assume that Aristophanes took Sophocles' death into account from the very beginning of his writing process.[58] This assumption gains in probability when we consider that the reason for Dionysus' journey into Hades is his feeling that there are no good tragic writers left (ll. 72, 96–97). Would Aristophanes have made this claim if he expected Sophocles to be alive at the time of the performance, perhaps sitting in the theatre of Dionysus? The plot of the *Frogs* is set up in a way that presupposes a radical change in Athenian tragedy: the contest between Euripides and Aeschylus revolves not only around questions of aesthetics and dramatic technique, but also around civic values, morals, political expediency and poetic fertility.[59] The impression that tragedy was undergoing these fundamental changes was reinforced, perhaps created, by the almost simultaneous disappearances of Euripides and Sophocles. The decisive factor for relegating Sophocles to the background was comic effectiveness: Aristophanes found the contrast between Euripides and Aeschylus much easier to exploit.[60] But Sophocles' invisibility is not a mere afterthought; it is the main reason for Dionysus' journey to Hades because the tragic scene in Athens can indeed be perceived as abandoned, 'for some [poets] are gone, and those that live are bad' (οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὐκέτ' εἰσίν, οἱ δ' ὄντες κακοί, 73).[61]

We have to be careful here: of course, Aristophanes had no access to a history of Greek literature which declared that 405 was the end of classical tragedy. Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles had passed away, but for all he knew, another genius might submit a superb tragic trilogy next year; tragedies continued to be written and performed in the fourth century BCE.[62] Even if he was pessimistic about the future, Aristophanes probably could not imagine that one year on from the first performance of the *Frogs*, Athens would have lost the Peloponnesian War and be headed for a regime change and ensuing civil war, political upheavals that did indeed mark the end of the world as he knew it.

V. Nostalgia in the late fifth century BCE

And yet, we have evidence indicating that the Athenians were (or would soon become) aware that the deaths of these three extraordinary playwrights was an important break. First, there is the note in the *Life of Aeschylus* (Test. A 12) and some other testimonies[63] that the Athenians allowed reperformance of his tragedies 'after his death' (μετὰ <τὸν> θάνατον αὐτοῦ). Unfortunately, the text does not tell us when exactly after Aeschylus' death this was, and recent scholarship has been increasingly sceptical about Aeschylean reperformance.[64] We are on safer ground with an inscription mentioning that in 386 BCE an 'old drama' (παλαιὸν δρᾶμα) was reperformed for the first time: not even 20 years after the first performance of the *Frogs*, the impression that a classical past had to be preserved and revived became official policy.[65] Patricia Easterling is certainly right to call this

[57] See Müller (1995); Weißenberger (2008) 52–54.

[58] As, for example, is argued by Rademacher (1967) 254–56 and Schwinge (2002) 28–29.

[59] On this last aspect, whose importance is easily overlooked, see Dickerson (1974) 186–88.

[60] This point has been made repeatedly; see Rademacher (1967) 254; Dover (1993) 9; MacDowell (1995) 288. On the extended relationship between Aristophanes and Euripides, see Schwinge (2002).

[61] A quotation of Euripides' *Oeneus* (*fr.* 565.2).

[62] Easterling (1993) is a forceful reminder of the continuity of tragic performances.

[63] See below, n.73.

[64] See the careful analysis of the available evidence in Biles (2006–2007); his view is accepted by Hanink and Uhlig (2017) 65. Reperformance of Aeschylean tragedies is a point to which I will come back; see below, n.70.

[65] *IG* II^2 2318.1009–11 = DID A 1.201 *TrGF*; see Nervegna (2007) 15–18; Ceccarelli (2010) 113–14, with additional bibliography given at n.43; for its cultural impact, *cf.* Hanink (2017).

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'the single most important date in the history of fourth-century tragedy':[66] from now on, the glorious past, the peerless creations of the great playwrights of the preceding century became a permanent part of the landscape of tragic theatre, which had previously been (almost) exclusively based on novel creations.

We can speculate that defeat in the war and the ensuing turmoil, the loss of the empire and the fleet, that great instrument of Athenian power, made Athenians especially aware that the famous 50 years between Salamis and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War had indeed been a golden age in Athenian life. This nostalgia is already visible during the war itself: when Eupolis, in his *Demes* (around 412), has the greatest politicians of the past come back to life and right everything that is wrong in contemporary Athens, the yearning for past greatness is clearly visible. Reperforming and reading 'classical' tragedy was part of this yearning for a glorified past, as became evident some time later, in the middle of the fourth century, when Lycurgus instituted what we may call a 'cultural policy' that included setting up statues of the three 'classical' tragedians in the theatre of Dionysus and establishing official versions of the texts:[67] tragedy was part of the great past of which Athens was proud and which it sought to resurrect.

It is no exaggeration, then, to claim that an apprehension of this break and a foretaste of this nostalgia was in the air in 405. After the catastrophic failure of the Sicilian Expedition, a series of military disasters and the ensuing political upheavals (such as the failed oligarchic coup of 411), spectators must have been pessimistic about the city's future. Sophocles and Euripides had been rivals and staples of the theatre for several decades; they had won the competition numerous times, and their tragedies were remembered, quoted and discussed. When both passed away, in a period when Athens was fighting for its very existence, this must have been perceived as a blow by both intellectuals and ordinary Athenians.[68] The theatre might recover, Athens might still win the war and be secure and rich once again, but a great period was irrevocably over. Aristophanes' *Frogs* thus presented a vivid expression of what many members of the audience must have felt.

VI. Reperformances of Aeschylus?

Even before Lycurgus' move to establish public control over the written texts of Athenian tragedy, the nostalgia for and resurrection of 'classical' tragedy relied on writing; reperformances would not have been possible without written copies of these plays. We have seen that reading and writing are mentioned several times in the *Frogs*. Moreover, many interpreters have argued that Aristophanes' citations of Aeschylean plays, most notably in the *Frogs*, but also in other comedies, are clear indications that the texts of these tragedies were available to him.[69] However, some scholars have claimed that Aristophanes' citations can be traced back to reperformances of Aeschylus (see section IV); whenever he refers to a tragedy by Aeschylus (who, we should remember, left Athens and died several years before Aristophanes was born), it means that he and his audience had recently witnessed such a reperformance.[70] A number of arguments (many of them collected by

[66] Easterling (1997) 213.

[67] See Papastamati-von Moock (2007); Hanink (2014), especially 60–68.

[68] Biles (2011) 211. I note in passing that Taplin (2014) 141, in a paper that is otherwise arguing for a re-evaluation of our negative judgement of fourth-century tragedy, agrees that the event may have been perceived as significant: 'The death of Euripides, followed closely by Sophocles, supplies the [*Frogs*] "Death of Tragedy" scenario—and indeed it may well have seemed somewhat like that at the time'.

[69] See, for example, Lowe (1993) (a brilliant and important paper, published in a somewhat obscure place); Nieddu (2004); Zogg (2014); (2017); and n.72; below.

[70] This is especially the case in Radt's editions of the fragments of Aeschylus in *TrGF* 3.56–57; see also Cantarella (1965); Newiger (1961) 427–29. Lech (2008), Lamari (2015) and Rosenbloom (2018) 62–64 cautiously accept Aeschylean

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Zachary Biles)[71] make this assumption quite improbable; here are some of the most important ones: (1) if we take every reference, quotation and parody of Aeschylean tragedies as pointing to reperformance, we have to assume 23 such reperformances during the 20 years between 425 and 405 (reperformances, we should remember, for which there is not a shred of evidence); (2) the sheer number and the verbatim precision of citations in *Frogs* cannot be explained by the memory of reperformed plays;[72] (3) given the availability and diffusion of written texts, there is no reason to assume that Aristophanes was unable to make use of them. If people could 'copy out' passages from Morsimus (and go to hell for it), there is no reason to deny the possibility that Aristophanes could do the same for the more popular Aeschylus. Moreover, I would add that the passage *Acharnians* 9–11,[73] in which Dicaeopolis narrates that he was shocked when a tragedy of Theognis was staged while he was 'expecting Aeschylus' (προσδοκῶν τὸν Αἰσχύλον, 9–11), is not a straightforward testimony for reperformance and has been explained in several ways.[74]

VII. The *Frogs* as an example of canonization

I will now show that the changes and developments we have seen so far should be understood in the light of Assmann's ideas about the emergence of cultural memory. While the focus of his study is on earlier (the Homeric epics) and later (philology in Alexandria) periods of Greek culture, Athens at the turn of the fifth century BCE offers a clear example of the momentous cultural changes that characterize processes of canonization and the establishment of a great 'classical' past. I want to summarize the areas in which *Frogs* can be understood as an early example of Greek canonization in five points:

(1) We have seen that Aristophanes emphasizes the gap between Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides on the one hand, and in contrast to the lesser tragedians who are still active: 'They're small fry, chatterboxes, they twitter like swallows and ruin the art …; they're gone right away after one piss against tragedy' (ἐπιφυλλίδες ταῦτ' ἐστὶ καὶ στωμύλματα, | χελιδόνων μουσεῖα, λωβηταὶ τέχνης, | ἃ φροῦδα θᾶττον, ἢν μόνον χορὸν λάβῃ, | ἅπαξ προσουρήσαντα τῇ τραγῳδίᾳ, 92–95). While the art of the three great playwrights lives on and can still be enjoyed, these epigones are ephemeral and will be forgotten (they will soon be 'out', φροῦδα). The fourth century would confirm what Aristophanes and his audience intuited: these three writers were indeed exceptional and unlike later tragic poets. Their extraordinary quality and the sense of the tragic stage's emptiness after their disappearance contributed to creating the conviction that they constituted the great classical past of tragedy. As Assmann puts it: 'The emergence of the classics altered the tense of culture. The "festive" distinction between primal time and the present was now joined by another division—that between past and present, the ancient and the modern. The past was the time of the "classics"'.[75] Later

reperformance, albeit on a more modest scale. Nervegna (2014) 166–72 looks at Aeschylus in the fourth century; she assumes that reperformance took place, but points out that there is no uncontroversial evidence for it.

[71] Biles (2006–2007).

[72] This is demonstrated by Gelzer (2005). Henderson (2020) 42 mentions some (potential) 'cases of originals inaccurately cited in comedy', but neglects the more numerous cases where originals are cited accurately and verbatim: it seems unlikely that this could have been achieved from oral memory alone.

[73] A scholion on this passage is one of the key witnesses for Aeschylean reperformance; for a careful discussion of its implications, see Lamari (2015) 195–97. We have no way of assessing the value of Quintilian's (10.1.66) claim that later poets staged 'corrected versions' of Aeschylus' tragedies (*correctas eius fabulas*); *cf.* Nervegna (2014) 167.

[74] See Biles (2006–2007) 221–27.

[75] Assmann (2011) 77.

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developments in the fourth century[76] will bring this process to completion: when Heraclides Ponticus writes a work called *On the three tragic poets* (*Περὶ τῶν τριῶν τραγῳδοποιῶν*), it is clear that Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are now seen as a group that embodies the very essence of tragedy. In Assmann's words: 'The most important step toward canonization is the act of "closure." This draws a definitive line between the canonical and the apocryphal, and between the primary and the secondary'.[77] An impressive example of this act of closure can be seen in an epigram that the tragic poet Astydamas is said to have composed around the middle of the fourth century BCE in which he expresses his wish to compete with these masters (ἐκρίθην … παράμιλλος), a wish that will never be fulfilled because they belong to the past (χρόνῳ προέχουσ[ι]).[78] This is a sense of belatedness typical of post-classical writers, when the canon has been established and newcomers have the impression of being left out. Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* is a precursor of this classical closure when he declares that all living tragic poets are worthless.

(2) Another point that is typical of this classical closure is the care and attention that are expended on establishing, securing and interpreting the text of the great poets. We have seen that the tragedians' texts began circulating at the end of the fifth century. Lycurgus' reforms were aimed at protecting the authenticity of the tragic texts by forbidding any deviation from the official Athenian copy in public performances.[79] As far as we know, serious scholarly work on the texts of the tragedians did not begin until the third century, in the Alexandrian Library, where scholars such as Aristophanes of Byzantium, Aristarchus and later Didymus discussed questions of their establishment and interpretation. Assmann's description of Jewish culture according to Josephus is certainly valid for the work of these Alexandrian philologists: 'continuous exegesis fulfills the function of institutionalizing cultural continuity that in the pagan world is fulfilled by ritual repetition'.[80] This is not yet the case in Aristophanes' Athens: there is certainly a considerable distance between, on the one hand, someone copying out 'passages from Morsimus' or Aristophanes using manuscripts of Aeschylus and Euripides to write the competition scene between his characters, and, on the other hand, the work of these ancient philologists, but the importance of written texts for personal reading had begun to develop at the end of the fifth century.

(3) Biles has pointed out that the competition scene in Hades can be described as an enactment of the tragic *agōn*, a 'theater of the dead'.[81] It is thus an example of what Assmann calls the transition 'from ritual to textual continuity'.[82] Tragedy had, for the greater part of the fifth century, existed as a performance embedded in a ritual, the Dionysiac festivals. Audiences had to wait every year for the arrival of these ritual occasions to see tragedies, and of course these were new tragedies written by living poets. As this ritual repetition is complemented (and eventually replaced) by textual 'presentification', the time structure of cultural memory

[76] See above, section IV, with nn.67 and 68.

[77] Assman (2011) 78.

[78] *Fr.* 60 T 2a *TrGF* = Page, *FGE* 33–34. Page is certainly right in arguing that this epigram must refer to Astydamas the Younger. On the statue of Astydamas, the epigram and the anecdote that it was rejected by the council (perhaps because of its boastfulness), see Papastamati-von Moock (2014) 23–35.

[79] On Lycurgus' law and its implications, see Finglass (2012) 11; Hanink (2014) 60–69.

[80] Assmann (2011) 76.

[81] Biles (2011) 220–22; the quotation is on p. 220. This plot element was probably used in several comedies of the late fifth century BCE; see Griffith (2013) 165–66.

[82] Assmann (2011) 70–86.

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undergoes important changes:[83] 'To reconnect with the meaning of written cultural texts, you do not have to wait for the next performance; you simply have to read them'.[84] The *Frogs* shows an early stage of this change: Dionysus is not content with simply reading Euripides, he yearns to see his tragedies presented on stage, and he wants more tragedies by his favourite writer, not just to reread the available ones. Reperformances of classical tragedies after 386 show the same mixture of textual continuity and ritual re-enactment (as does, arguably, the fact that even today theatres stage these classical texts, including Aristophanes). But the fact that the competition in *Frogs* quotes from numerous tragedies and that Aeschylus and Euripides present their 'collected works' shows that the transition towards textual continuity has begun. It is thus right on target when Nick Lowe points out that the intellectual relevance of the *Frogs* is due to 'the historical moment when an author becomes his books, and the wider question of what use the books of dead authors are to the living'.[85] And, of course, these reperformances would not have been possible if there had not been authoritative texts of the classics.

(4) One crucial element of the extended comparison between Aeschylus and Euripides is the fact that they are very different poets, or, to be more precise: that Euripides has introduced fundamental changes into the established genre of tragedy; his character repeatedly emphasizes that he has made Athenian audiences 'cleverer' and 'more alert' (see 957–58: νοεῖν, ὁρᾶν, ξυνιέναι, στρέφειν ἐρᾶν, τεχνάζειν, | κάχ' ὑποτοπεῖσθαι, περινοεῖν ἅπαντα) while Aeschylus' spectators were 'fools' (μώρους, 910) and 'naive' (ἠλίθιος, 917); Euripides claims that he has put tragedy on a diet to make it 'leaner' (ἴσχνανα μὲν πρώτιστον αὐτὴν καὶ τὸ βάρος ἀφεῖλον, 941). Poetry had certainly changed and developed in Greece before the fifth century, but the annual dramatic competition in Athens had led audiences more than ever to expect innovation. Poets were no longer content to repeat what had been transmitted to them, but were looking for new approaches and new angles on the mythological stories they brought to the stage (the fairly limited number of myths that were transformed into tragedies entailed that poets would often bring the same stories to the stage; this must have heightened the audience's expectation of and attention to innovative features in their respective treatments of the stories). The availability of written texts must have exacerbated this pressure on poets: when hundreds of plays could be read and compared, every new piece was in competition not just with its direct rivals at the festival, but with a huge number of texts that were present in the minds (and on the book shelves?) of at least some members of the audience. This new situation is depicted when Euripides is said to possess books (above, section II): a 'modern' poet has to work with constant regard for the literary tradition in the form of written books and to engage in an intertextual dialogue with his predecessors and rivals.[86] We have seen that Aristophanes himself is 'modern' in this sense (see n.72 above). Assmann describes this process (in a somewhat simplified manner) as follows: 'The writing poet … saw it [tradition] as something external; he felt the need inside to express himself in opposition to what had come down to him'.[87]

[83] See also above, n.18.
[84] Biles (2011) 74–75.
[85] Lowe (1993) 74.
[86] See Torrance (2013).
[87] Assmann (2011) 83.

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(5) My final point concerns the wider social function of this process of canonization. Recent scholarship has repeatedly pointed out that Lycurgus' attention to the text of the tragedians and his plans for making the theatre of Dionysus more monumental were more than personal hobby horses: they were political decisions, aimed at emphasizing the greatness of Athens' past and its control of these texts.[88] Classical tragedy was thus an important part of Athenian collective identity; in a difficult political environment, it allowed citizens to feel proud of their city. Establishing the tragic canon became an important part of civic identity, a process that Assmann describes for the canon in Jewish culture.[89] As is well known, the Museion in Alexandria had a similar function with its library of all the Greek texts the Ptolemies could lay their hands on.[90] Again, we see that this process has begun in *Frogs*: what started out as a personal quest to restore Dionysus' favourite poet turns into a public endeavour; what counts in the end is the moral and political utility of tragedy for contemporary Athens.[91]

VIII. Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, Aristophanes' *Frogs* can be read as a document illustrating the process of canonization and classical closure that has been analysed by Assmann. We have to be precise here: these are small details in a larger story. Assmann is certainly right to focus on what he calls 'the hypoleptic process as an institutionalization of authority and criticism',[92] which he sees exemplified in the work of the Alexandrian philologists. This process was a change that took a long time to reach its conclusion, and Aristophanes' *Frogs* demonstrates that some of its elements can be observed at the end of the fifth century BCE. And I would go even further: some specifics of the historical, political and cultural environment of the *Frogs* were significant influences on the beginning of Greek canonization.

To sum up the most important of these factors, we can first point to the serendipitous fact that Athens produced three outstanding tragedians in a relatively brief time span. The vicissitudes of textual transmission do not allow us today to compare them to their less successful colleagues, but we have seen that soon after their deaths, contemporaries regarded them as exceptional. The deaths of two of those great playwrights came at a time when Athenians had reason to look back at this period with some nostalgia: their political and military situation did not offer much cause for optimism, and many Athenians may have feared and felt that Athens' best days lay in the past. This nostalgia coincided with the availability, for the first time in the history of Greek culture, of a large archive of written texts that allowed comparison and resurrection of this great past, be it in private readings or in reperformances. Both roads for a classical revival were taken: reperformance may have had a more palpable impact in the fourth century to keep classical tragedy alive and to drive home its importance for Athenian collective identity; in the long term, it was the textual tradition that was to prove more effectual for ensuring the long-term reception of Athenian tragedy (as is already hinted at in Aristotle's famous remark that the quality of a

[88] See Hanink (2014), especially 67: 'This move to preserve the texts of classical tragedy marked an attempt on the part of men such as Lycurgus to publicise the three great tragedians as unique products of Athens and to affirm that, as such, both the poets and their poetry were inseparable from Athenian institutions and history'.

[89] Assmann (2011), especially 106–08.

[90] There is a wealth of scholarly treatments; I refer readers to Erskine (1995) and Asper (2001).

[91] See Arnott (1991); Hose (1995) 170–82; von Möllendorff (1996–1997); Schmidt (1998).

[92] Assmann (2011) 260.

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tragedy can be appreciated in reading: *Poet.* 1462a12–13 διὰ γὰρ τοῦ ἀναγινώσκειν φανερὰ ὁποία τίς ἐστιν).

Another important yet contingent factor for the beginning of canonization is the metatheatrical aspect of comedy. While references to the stage and to other texts are the exception in tragedy, comedy displays its status as theatrical performance and refers to numerous other texts, especially to tragedies;[93] moreover, comic poets also referred to their own works and to each other in what Biles has called 'intertextual biography'.[94] This metatheatrical element is strong in the *Frogs*, where the first two lines refer to the 'usual jokes' (of rivals) and to the 'spectators' (τι τῶν εἰωθότων … οἱ θεώμενοι). This aspect of comedy helped create a space where thinking and talking about tragedy (and poetry in general) were accepted and important activities; this opened up a world of literature where poets and texts, whether contemporary or past, entered into an extended dialogue.[95] This (meta)theatrical space in which tragedies that had been performed on separate occasions were put in dialogue with each other and were constantly parodied and mocked, but also quoted, brought to life and evaluated, was not only a playful world of intertextuality, but also a venue where poetry's value for political ideas and civic identity could be discussed.

Scholars have repeatedly warned that our view of the history of tragedy may be 'distorted' by Aristophanes' *Frogs*,[96] and there is certainly some truth to this warning: the play is a comic snapshot of cultural life in Athens, and we should not take all of its claims at face value. Yet in many ways it offers us important insights into the process of canonization, the transition from ritual to textual continuity and the establishment of collective memory in Greece. Dionysus the reader of Euripides' *Andromeda* is thus not an incongruous anachronism, but rather a key witness of important changes in media and culture and of the creation of a specific form of cultural memory.

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[93] See Taplin (1986); Hartwick (2014) 210–11; Nelson (2016); Farmer (2017).

[94] See Biles (2002).

[95] Griffith (2013) 84–86 has some good remarks on this feature in comedy.

[96] Easterling (1993) 568: 'our view of things has been distorted by Aristophanes' persuasive story in *Frogs*, and … the death of Sophocles in 405 did not after all mark the point when tragedy ceased to be a highly creative medium'.

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