

Opsis, Color and Emotion in Aeschylus and Euripides: Three Case Studies

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle sets out to list the essential features of a well-composed tragedy (1450a38): first is the plot (μῦθος); second, the psychological characterization (ἦθη) of the *dramatis personae*; third, disposition (διάνοια); fourth, language and exposition (λέξις); the fifth and sixth element, music (μελοποιία) and spectacle (ὄψις), are mentioned together. As well summarized by Calame 1996, Aristotle regards *opsis* as a seductive element of tragedy that, though seductive, “is definitely excluded from Aristotle’s definition of the poetic art; it is relegated to the sphere of the costume designer, not that of the poet. The consequences for Aristotle are clear: tragedy can create its effects outside the context of theatrical competition, even without actors.”

As several scholars have pointed out, one of the implications of this passage in the *Poetics* is that, according to Aristotle, a tragic text can achieve *katharsis* even without performance, that is, as a text that is meant for a readership, not a theater audience (Calame 1996, Taplin 1990, Silk 1994). While it has been established that by *opsis* Aristotle means everything that pertains the visual aspect of performance and may be translated with the English ‘spectacle’, little attention has been paid to chromatic vocabulary in the context of *opsis* and its relation to the tragic text, and specifically to the relationship between sight, spectacle and the mind’s eye, that is, what an audience member or reader might be able to visualize through the evocative power of words, independently of what he or she can see on the stage.

In this paper I explore the implications of Aristotle’s observations on *opsis* through an analysis of Euripides’ and Aeschylus’ use of chromatic vocabulary and visual imagery to

describe the emotions of the characters on stage or, conversely, to instill specific emotions in the audience. This relates to *opsis* in two ways.

First, I build on existing scholarship on the cognitive and performative function of tragic props (Chaston 2010, Mueller 2016, Wiles 2007) to assess the strengths and limits of elements of *opsis*—mainly masks (such as Dionysus’ in Euripides’ *Bacchae*), but also objects such as the purple tapestry in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*—and their relation to, and interplay with, the tragic text; secondly, I argue that chromatic vocabulary functions as a complement to “optic” elements during performance and that, in a scenario where a play would have been read instead of seen, it contributes to the reader’s visualization of the scene through his or her mind’s eye. I illustrate my argument through close readings of passages from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Euripides’ *Bacchae* and *Medea*.

My analysis of these texts also underscores the close ties between tragedy, medicine and painting in the fifth century, as the two tragedians use chromatic vocabulary and medical terminology to illustrate, so to speak, the embodiment of emotions such as *erōs* (erotic desire), *phobos* (fear) and *cholos* (anger).

Bibliography

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