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The Birth of Tragedy in the Cinquecento: Humanism and Literary History

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We now know a great deal, generally speaking, about the uses and abuses of Aristotle between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. The philosopher was closely studied via humanist methods while simultaneously being aggressively revised and revalued—alternately venerated as a master, flatly rejected, and pressed into the service of visibly alien intellectual programs. One sphere, however, has been almost totally neglected in this flourishing historiography: the vastly popular enterprise of literary criticism under the aegis of Aristotle's *Poetics*, that short and perplexing book whose meaning was hotly debated and whose more intelligible precepts were endlessly repeated by contemporaries.¹ The *Poetics* has thus been effectively

¹ For the omission, see, e.g., Charles B. Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); G. H. R. Parkinson, ed., *Routledge History of Philosophy* vol. IV: *The Renaissance and Seventeenth Century Rationalism* (London: Routledge, 1993); Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, eds., *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Constance Blackwell and Sachiko Kusukawa, eds., *Philosophy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Conversations with Aristotle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); and James Hankins, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). An exception is Charles B. Schmitt et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), which includes an essay by Brian Vickers on "Rhetoric and Poetics," 715–45. Older literature did habitually discuss the *Poetics* as part of a larger tradition of Aristotelian engagement: see Paul O. Kristeller, "Philosophical Movements of the Renaissance," in his *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*

left to the attentions of literary critics, who, however, have passed it over in a stony silence for the last several decades. Even the few who have thoughtfully commented on early modern poetic theory have often done so with the aim of showing that their historical actors were not very Aristotelian at all.² In other words, now that the middle twentieth century's interest in actively redeploying Aristotle's literary ideas is long past, the *Poetics* sits entombed in the intimidating and rapidly aging standard works that survey its sixteenth-century adherents and detractors, nearly always from the relatively limited viewpoint of doctrines such as the three unities and catharsis.³ At the same time, this older literature did already hint strongly that early modern poetic theory embodied significantly varied responses to Aristotle, that this dynamic field constituted a narrative taken within its own terms.

But did readers of the *Poetics* in fact do anything worth noting in the wider story of the early modern Aristotle? In at least one case, the answer is discernibly yes, and not merely because those readers recapitulated the history of the study of Aristotle on a smaller scale. When a certain group of Italian philologists took up the *Poetics*, they examined it in a way to which Aristotle's other texts usually were not amenable: as a vital but difficult historical source. In other words—at specific moments, at any rate—they sought in the *Poetics* neither prescriptive doctrines nor scientific statements supposed to apply to the present day, but specifically historical information, which, however, proved almost incredibly elusive. The most signal histori-

(1956; repr., Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969), 17–31 at 23; “Un codice padovano di Aristotele postillato da Francesco ed Ermolao Barbaro,” in *Studies*, 337–53 at 338–39; “The Aristotelian Tradition,” in his *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper, 1961), 40; and *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 114; E. N. Tigerstedt, “Observations on the Reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in the Latin West,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 15 (1968): 7–24.

² Luc Deitz, “‘Aristoteles imperator noster . . .’? J. C. Scaliger and Aristotle on Poetic Theory,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2 (1995): 54–67 and Iulius Caesar Scaliger, *Poeticæ libri septem*, ed. Luc Deitz and Gregor Vogt-Spira, 5 vols. (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994–2003). Older discussions of anti-Aristotelian poetic theorists: B. Weinberg, “Scaliger versus Aristotle on Poetics,” *Modern Philology* 39 (1942): 337–60; and G. Zonta, “Rinascimento aristotelismo e barocco,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 54 (1934): 1–63, 185–240.

³ Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and “Robortello on the *Poetics*, 1548” (319–48) and “Castelvetro's Theory of Poetics” (349–71) in R. S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962); Joel Elias Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (1908; rept., New York: Columbia University Press, 1924).

cal subject raised by the *Poetics* concerned the birth of tragedy. What was the tragedy's early form, at what point could one say that the drama had become the tragedy properly speaking, and above all, how was the tragedy performed in Aristotle's own time? Aristotle himself suggested all of these questions but offered scant guidance for answering them. As an eyewitness to performances of the tragedy, he evidently took for granted that his readers knew what those performances were like—an assumption that seems to have been as maddening to sixteenth-century readers as it remains today. This difficulty, and its allure, motivated a humanist literary history that could complete or amplify Aristotle's meaning through a searching use of alternative sources. Aristotle's story, in other words, appeared as a kind of heroic fragment, a damaged part of a lost whole like the remnants of ancient statuary that sixteenth-century humanists so eagerly excavated and named.⁴ First origins in general were a favorite humanist subject, for which the many ancient and modern sources ranged from the elder Pliny's *Natural History* to Polydore Vergil's *On Discovery* (*De inventoribus rerum*).⁵ But the early history of the drama was at once fascinating to humanists and exceedingly poorly attested: to study it was to leap directly into the "shipwreck of antiquity," the *naufragium antiquitatis* long lamented by humanists in general. Nonetheless, a certain sort of humanist could be captivated by such questions, precisely because the evidence was so slender and the need for imaginative reconstruction so manifest.

The protagonists of this sixteenth-century discussion included such humanist luminaries as Angelo Poliziano, Francesco Robortello, Piero Vettori, and Francesco Patrizi da Cherso. Much was at stake, in retrospect, because of the claims that surrounded the emergence of the earliest operas around 1600: the Greek tragedy had been sung from beginning to end, asserted figures such as Girolamo Mei and Vincenzo Galilei, and the new form of musical drama meant the tragedy's direct revival.⁶ But in fact, this identification of the opera with the Greek tragedy constituted a position in an already well-known conversation; the Florentine Camerata's view was

⁴ On sculptural fragments, Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 120–28, 174–87, 205–7. This reference was suggested to me by an anonymous reader for the *JHL*.

⁵ Polydore Vergil, *On Discovery*, tr. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶ Barbara Russano Hanning, *Of Poetry and Music's Power: Humanism and the Creation of Opera* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), esp. 1–19; Claude Palisca, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 408–28.

no arbitrary or spontaneous guess.⁷ The tradition from which the Camera-ta's discussions arose was distinctive as a mode of scholarship and likewise distinctive as a mode of literary study. In the first place, humanist literary history of this kind dealt neither in entire extant texts nor in unbridled, theory-driven polemics. In these respects it stood apart from other kinds of early modern literary study more often discussed today. The past thirty years have taught us greatly about humanist textual criticism and about the humanist exegesis of poetry, both fields in which novel and clearly identifiable developments began in the late fifteenth century.⁸ We also, of course, have ample documentation of the rise of neoclassical literary theory out of (and sometimes against) its sources in Aristotle and Horace.⁹ Humanist literary history, however, differed notably from these, as also from the nineteenth-century German scholarship that shared the humanists' predilection for the fragmentary and the lost. From Poliziano onward, the literary historians were willing to combine Greek and Roman sources in their search for the early drama. Even more disconcertingly to readers of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), they hesitated to draw a sharp distinction between the comedy and the tragedy at all. Rather, they came with open minds to the question of origins and to the puzzle of how the extant tragedy had been performed. Literary history, in other words, was a well-defined and innovative enterprise that deserves our attention as a part of humanist scholarship. As an encounter with Aristotle, finally, this episode shows how serious scholars approached a decidedly unusual situation: here the philosopher, far from appearing as copious, massive, and unwieldy, was manifestly inadequate. While Aristotle demanded to be treated as the primary source for the early drama, if for no other reason than his proximity to the

⁷ Cf. Nino Pirrotta, "Tragédie et comédie dans la Camerata florentina," in *Musique et poésie au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1954), 287–97, esp. 295; and "Early Opera and Aria," in *New Looks at Italian Opera: Essays in Honor of Donald J. Grout*, ed. William W. Austin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 39–107, esp. 80–81; and, for a more measured argument, Danilo Aguzzi-Barbagli, "Francesco Patrizi e l'umanesimo musicale del Cinquecento," in *L'umanesimo in Istria*, eds. V. Branca and S. Graciotti (Florence: Olschki, 1983), 63–90, esp. 67–68, 82–84.

⁸ A selection of works in English: Anthony Grafton, "On the Scholarship of Poliziano and Its Context," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977): 150–88; and *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–93), 9–70; Craig Kallendorf, "From Virgil to Vida: The *Poeta Theologus* in Italian Renaissance Commentary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 41–62; and *The Other Virgil: 'Pessimistic' Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); William J. Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁹ See the literature in note 3 above.

events, he also needed to be read in imaginative, decisive ways that were nonetheless grounded in sources rather than in undirected speculation. The resulting competition, so to speak, between Aristotle and later sources was managed in different ways by different scholars. In this situation, even the best-qualified historical scholars were obliged to deal with Aristotle by boldly supplementing him; one could not calmly explicate what was not there to start with. We see in the case of the literary historians, then, a moment of departure from Aristotle in order to fulfill his purposes, perhaps even a moment of frustration with the ordinarily verbose philosopher who had suddenly turned mute.

That the humanist literary historians were distinctive could be demonstrated on the basis of two sentences alone, namely, the perplexing passage in Aristotle's *Poetics* that animated the entire argument of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and which sixteenth-century scholars were apt to take rather differently. The reason is that this passage posits two things at once: in the first place, a very broad common origin for the tragedy and comedy in extemporaneous performance, but in the second place, clearly defined precursor genres that (as Nietzsche saw it) drove comedy in one direction, tragedy in another. Here is Aristotle:

So, at the beginning, tragedy was extemporaneous and so was comedy; tragedy came from those who led the dithyramb; comedy came from the singers of phallic verses, which even today are still performed by choruses in many cities. So tragedy, bit by bit, grew up out of its predecessors, until it reached its true magnitude. (I.4)

Nietzsche, as we know, took these alleged precursor forms very seriously indeed, as it was customary to do in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ But sixteenth-century readers had different interpretive habits. To begin with this puzzling passage itself, the humanists viewed Aristotle's references to the phallic verse and the dithyramb as vague, not well motivated, and lacking in explanatory power. Julius Caesar Scaliger, in a treatise published in 1561, tried valiantly to imagine what Aristotle could really have meant by saying such a thing: Scaliger's best guess was that these earlier verse forms had been composed in very short lines of verse (such as *iê paian*, a dithyrambic line with only four syllables), while the mature comedy and tragedy had

¹⁰ Jürgen Leonhardt, *Phalloslied und Dithyrambos. Aristoteles über den Ursprung des griechischen Dramas* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1991).

much longer lines of verse.¹¹ He thus took a jarringly literal approach to Aristotle's words "and so the tragedy grew with respect to its predecessors until it reached its present magnitude." So, although a few sixteenth-century scholars did dutifully collect what little was known about the dithyramb and the phallic song, as attempts to show at least what Aristotle was referring to, they regarded it very much as an open question how these genres could possibly be relevant.

In that case, what did humanist readers see in Aristotle's cryptic lines about the birth of tragedy? The literary historians focused, quite universally, on the opening part of the passage, where we are told that "at the beginning, tragedy was extemporaneous (*autoschediastikê*), and so was comedy." They saw two implications here. First, that tragedy and comedy were essentially similar; there was no radical difference in their origin and no radical difference in their natures. Secondly, that the real birth of tragedy and comedy should be looked for, so they usually inferred, in the dozens of extemporaneous (or at least unwritten) communal songs that were known to have been sung especially in civic and religious festivals. Scholars with a completist bent, like Julius Caesar Scaliger and Francesco Patrizi, luxuriated in the long lists they compiled of abstruse and poorly known song forms like the rhapsody, the threnos, and the hyporchema.

In answer to the question about the origins of tragedy and comedy, then, these scholars pointed not to a definite genealogy but to a kind of poetic primordial soup of extemporaneous performance (often glossed as song), which had given rise simply to "the drama," in Latin *fabula*. Meanwhile, that assumption about song in early poetry raised the very large subject of music: did tragedy and comedy incorporate song, in the choruses or perhaps throughout? Both of these orientations were arguably influenced by Italian drama of the sixteenth century. That drama often failed to correspond well with either comedy or tragedy—we might think of Poliziano's *Orfeo*, of the plays of Giovanni Battista Giraldi, or indeed of the first thorough-composed opera, Rinuccini's *Dafne*. And sixteenth-century entertainments often included music, especially in the form of *intermedi*, which featured allegorical characters, dancing, and dumbshows. So Julius Caesar Scaliger went on to suggest, as an explanation for why Aristotle derived comedy from the phallic song, "I *think* the phallic song was like a mime (*mimus*), and the mime *most likely* resembled comedy because they *probably* acted parts."¹² The scholar speaking here is surely Scaliger the spectator of courtly entertainments.

¹¹ Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetics* (1561), 357.

¹² Scaliger, *Poetics*, 18.

But there was a further reason, this time a scholarly reason, for the literary historians to posit a similarity between tragedy and comedy and to inquire about the place of music in them. It was already at work in Angelo Poliziano's lectures on Terence and ancient comedy, delivered in Florence in the 1480s.¹³ Poliziano started his introductory lecture with a brief discussion of Aristotle on the difference between tragedy and comedy—he read the *Poetics* in a manuscript that he annotated and that remains in Florence—and he later inserted a translation of Aristotle's passage about tragedy and comedy being at first "extemporaneous" (*extemporalis*) and then developing respectively from the dithyramb and phallic song.¹⁴ But Poliziano set those passages of Aristotle into a rich matrix of something different. Specifically, as we might expect for someone giving lectures on Latin comedy, Poliziano gave his hearers large sections of the introduction to the comedy attributed to the Roman grammarian Donatus, whose huge commentary on Terence had been discovered by Giovanni Aurispa in the 1430s.¹⁵ Where Aristotle was puzzling and brief, Donatus was clear and pleasingly full of detail. In some respects his doctrines differed from Aristotle's, but two of his major discussions set the tone for the ways in which contemporaries would read Aristotle himself. First of all, Donatus was not concerned to differentiate sharply between the comedy and the tragedy, either as a question of historical origins or in their eventual form. He started his discussion with a long section called, simply, *De fabula*, "On the Drama," and he proceeded to expound at gratifying length about early popular songs both in the Greek world and then in the Latin world (showing, in effect, that drama also had a spontaneous birth in Italy). Eventually, of course, Donatus did come to focus on comedy, which was precisely what made his commentary so valuable to begin with, because the part of Aristotle's *Poetics* dealing with comedy was lost.

Donatus was likewise the person who raised the subject of music, in a later part of his essay that Poliziano also appropriated in detail. Specifically, Donatus undertook to explain the production credits, or *tituli*, that were

¹³ Angelo Poliziano, *La commedia antica e l'Andria di Terenzio*, ed. R. L. Roselli (Florence: Sansoni, 1973).

¹⁴ For Poliziano's notes on the *Poetics*, Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 59–64.

¹⁵ *Aeli Donati commentum Terenti*, ed. Paul Wessner, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1966); see the essays known to early moderns as "De fabula" (1: 13–22) and "De comoedia" (1: 22–31). On the discovery, Remigio Sabbadini, "Elio Donato 'In Terentium' scoperto nel secolo XV," in Sabbadini's *Storia e critica di testi latini*, 2nd ed. (Padua: Antenore, 1971), 159–60.

found in manuscripts and printed versions of Terence's plays, containing such notations as "The music was composed [*modos fecit*] by Flaccus, son of Claudius, for even flutes, left and right."¹⁶ Donatus (and accordingly Poliziano) explained that the "left flutes" corresponded to a serious subject, the "right flutes" to humorous subjects, and when both left and right flutes were found in the production credits, this meant that the ensuing drama contained both serious matter and jokes. Here, by the way, was another good reason for Donatus to speak in the first instance simply about the origin of *fabula*: he was not concerned to define the extant genre of comedy in an exclusive way. On the question of precisely what parts of the performance were sung, Donatus was unfortunately vague, but he made it clear that music was a crucial part of the performance. A professional musician, rather than the playwright himself, was responsible for composing the music, and the music remained the same for each performance of the same comedy. The result (and Poliziano repeated this too) was that the audience, simply by hearing the introductory music, could already identify the play even before the prologue was delivered. Finally, seized with a justifiable curiosity about just what this singing was, Poliziano did more research and found tantalizing information in the Latin grammarian Diomedes. From Diomedes, Poliziano learned that a performance of Roman comedy was split between spoken dialogue and solo song, both of them necessarily performed by the actors, because there was no chorus (Diomedes added that in a Greek comedy, a chorus would also sing).¹⁷ In an Italian environment that saw frequent musical settings of ancient poetry, for example Horace's odes, the idea of a sung drama evidently appeared interesting and plausible, at least for the case of ancient Rome.¹⁸

In short, then, Poliziano's lecture on Terence from the 1480s already contained the whole framework that sixteenth-century readers brought to Aristotle's *Poetics* when they read it as literary history. This included a disposition to think of "the drama" or *fabula*, rather than the comedy or the tragedy exclusively; a highly miscellaneous account of the drama's origin in

¹⁶ "Modos fecit Flaccus Claudi filius tibiis parib. dextris et sinistris." (Part of the *titulus* to *Andria*, from the Paris 1552 edition of Terence, p. 53.) For Poliziano's attention to these *tituli*, see his collation of the Bembine manuscript, in Riccardo Ribuoili, *La collazione poliziana del codice bembino di Terenzio* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1981), plate 1.

¹⁷ Heinrich Keil, ed., *Grammatici latini*, 7 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1857–80), 1: 491.

¹⁸ See J. Riemer, "Zwischen 'gelehrter' und 'freier' Tradition: Horazvertonungen in der frühen Neuzeit," in *Strenae nataliciae: Neulateinische Studien: Wilhelm Kühlmann zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Wiegand (Heidelberg: Manutius, 2006), 127–53.

popular song; and a keen interest in the role of music in ancient performance. It was indeed utterly logical for Poliziano to ventilate these questions in a discussion of the Roman comedy, which was the subject of his major source Donatus. But at the same time, Poliziano's use of Donatus should probably be seen as an Aristotelian maneuver: it tended to supplement or to reconstruct Aristotle's scanty surviving words, and this in a context in which Poliziano did not strictly need to mention Aristotle at all. Poliziano's respect for Aristotle in general was great, as seen through both his attention to individual texts and his personal vision of an all-encompassing, cultivated, Aristotle-like erudition—even if he did sometimes wrangle violently with Aristotle's words, as when he attempted to educe the Platonic doctrine of the “poetic frenzy” (*poeticus furor*) from Aristotle's *Poetics*.¹⁹ Moreover, Poliziano's disposition to compare Aristotle with Donatus was characteristic of his scholarship in general, although not in the sense that he indiscriminately conflated two such different sources: Poliziano recognized well that antiquity contained discrete historical periods, for example when he defended the literature of the Latin Silver Age, in the persons of Statius and Seneca, against charges of decadence.²⁰ Rather, Poliziano habitually used texts from one period to illuminate those of another, as when he explicated Aristotle through later Greek and Latin philosophy or, conversely, when he studied the Greek sources of Latin poetry.²¹ This was also the technique of Poliziano's successors in literary history, who consciously compared Aristotle with later sources in an effort to uncover or reconstruct the obscure truth about the Greek tragedy.

Given that Donatus's essays on comedy and on drama were prefixed to the comedies of Terence, it should be no surprise that subsequent scholars writing about Terence—whose plays became a major growth industry for scholarship and commentary in the first two thirds of the sixteenth century—asked the same kinds of questions (although not, of course, because they had read Poliziano's lectures, which remained in manuscript). Further, to all appearances, these literary-historical discussions around the well-known Terence were responsible for setting the fundamental tone, and setting some of the basic questions, when contemporaries began to write the literary history of Greek tragedy. They undertook that project not merely in discursive treatises like J. C. Scaliger's or Francesco Patrizi's, but also,

¹⁹ Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 18–19, 60–64.

²⁰ Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 40–45. I owe this point to an anonymous reader for the *JHI*.

²¹ Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 60, 87, 98; Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, 1:32–37.

crucially, in the form of commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics*. In commenting on the historical parts of the *Poetics*, roughly sections 2 through 4, they regularly amplified Aristotle's list of precursor poetic forms into a great length. They worried over the names and dates of early tragedians not mentioned by Aristotle (such as Phrynichus and Thespis). They actively pursued the view—which gained support from Aristotle read in a certain way—that the origins of comedy and tragedy were alike. And, most tellingly, they all felt the need to guess what place music might have had in the performance of the Greek tragedy. But this was a subject on which Aristotle's *Poetics* was conspicuously silent. Although Aristotle mentioned that “rhythm, harmony and melody [*melos*]” formed parts of the performance, he gave absolutely no grounds for deciding what those parts had been.²² That contemporaries went looking for other Greek sources to decide the question of music with respect to the Greek tragedy seems eminently likely to be the result of their familiarity with the debates on Terence and the Roman comedy. Indeed, they very often used parts of the actual preface to Terence by Donatus, with citation or without. We, of course, continuing to operate by the standards of the nineteenth century, probably tend to view this procedure as shocking; but the sixteenth-century scholars were quite willing to import questions and import hypotheses from one department of antiquity to another. They hoped that the literary history of Rome might shed light on that of Greece, and vice versa.

Here there is room to discuss only the interventions of genuinely historical scholars, who also happen to be the only commentators who said anything of interest about the birth of tragedy: thus, writers such as Giorgio Valla, Vincenzo Maggi and Bartolomeo Lombardi, Alessandro Piccolomini, and Antonio Riccoboni can justifiably be omitted.²³ These discussions of literary history always unfolded inside of treatises or commentaries that concerned themselves with the rest of the *Poetics* as well, that is, inside discussions of an aesthetic and prescriptive nature: historical study could thus coexist with the aggressive drawing of literary lessons meant to be applied to the sixteenth century itself. Historical study coexisted also, sometimes uneasily, with literary theory and with textual criticism. And we

²² Aristotle, *Poetics (De arte poetica liber)*, ed. Rudolf Kassel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1449b.

²³ See Giorgio Valla, “De poetica,” in his *De expetendis et fugiendis rebus* (Venice, 1501); Vincenzo Maggi and Bartolomeo Lombardi, *In Aristotelis librum de poetica* (1550; repr., Munich: W. Fink, 1969); A. Piccolomini, *Annotationi . . . nel libro della Poetica d'Aristotele* (Venice, 1575); A. Riccoboni, *Poetica Aristotelis . . . latine conversa* (1587; repr., Munich: W. Fink, 1970).

will witness the wide range of approaches to Aristotle that recent scholarship has taught us to expect—always, however, within a method that involved comparing the philosopher with other historical sources.

Francesco Robortello's 1548 commentary on the *Poetics* was the first full-scale discussion of that text in the sixteenth century.²⁴ His discussion was highly focused on detail and relatively little interested in a broad conceptual historiography of the drama. Robortello did, however, endorse something like a primordial-soup theory of dramatic origins, and he did this with fairly little warrant from Aristotle's text. Robortello began by castigating the standard Latin translation of Aristotle's key passage, by Alessandro Pazzi, arguing that Pazzi had completely obscured the spontaneous character of poetry in the earliest times.²⁵ As Pazzi rendered it, Aristotle said that "at the beginning, both tragedy and comedy were crude and somewhat shapeless [*rudes . . . planeque informes*]," but Robortello viewed that translation as shirking the truth. He explained, "The words really mean, 'at the beginning they were *extemporaneous*.'" In other words, Robortello inferred that tragedy and comedy had really existed at the origins in an extemporaneous form, and one of his conclusions was that tragedy was in fact older than dithyrambic song, which he accordingly turned from one of the precursors of tragedy into one of the influences on its adolescence.²⁶ And Robortello extended his story to poetry at large, arguing that all poetry had begun as short extemporaneous performances that treated a single, small subject: he offered the bucolic eclogue as an example.²⁷ Finally, as Robortello considered the place of music in tragic performance, he not only asserted that only the chorus had sung part of their role; for help in glossing Aristotle's term *melos*, he specifically cited Donatus for the information that some part of the tragedy was delivered in song, *canticum* ("so Donatus directs us to call it in comedies").²⁸

Not every part of Robortello's account fit together perfectly; both

²⁴ Francesco Robortello, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* (1548; repr., Munich: W. Fink, 1968). On Robortello's doctrine in general, see Weinberg, "Robortello on the *Poetics*."

²⁵ Alessandro Pazzi (Paccius), tr., *Aristotelis Poetica* (Venice, 1536). Pazzi is not to be confused with Giulio Pace (Pacius), who commented on the complete works of Aristotle in the late sixteenth century.

²⁶ Robortello, *Explicationes*, 39, 40.

²⁷ Robortello, *Explicationes*, 42–43.

²⁸ Robortello, *Explicationes*, 124, 55; see Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b. Weinberg's assertion that Robortello "disdain[ed] . . . the current notion of tragedy and comedy stemming from Donatus and Diomedes" ("Robortello on the *Poetics*," 320) is cryptic and manifestly does not refer to this subject.

Greek and Roman sources, as he used them, raised problems for his claims. In the first place, Robortello explained calmly that “all the same customs obtained in Greek tragedy” as in Donatus’s account of the Roman comedy.²⁹ But this could not be, by his own account, because Robortello believed Greek actors did not sing, whereas he had just quoted Donatus explaining the place of “song” (*canticus*) in the comedy. On the Greek side, Robortello brought into his discussion the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* about music, an often tantalizing source that suggested a role for music in Greek performance extending well beyond the chorus. The most provocative problem, which Robortello quoted among others, was: “Question: Why does the tragic chorus never sing in the hypophrygian and hypodorian modes? Answer: The hypophrygian has an active character. . . . The hypodorian is magnificent and steady. . . . Both of these qualities are unsuited to the chorus and more proper to those on the stage, because they are imitative of heroes.”³⁰ To us, the implication seems obvious: the heroes of tragedy did sing, and particular modes were considered especially appropriate for them. Robortello, by contrast, treated this problem solely as a piece of evidence for the proposition that the chorus sang—oddly, because nothing in the *Poetics* directly implied that the actors did *not* sing. Since Robortello believed with other sixteenth-century readers that the *Problems* were by Aristotle, he was thus dealing roughly with Aristotle in reading the musical *Problems* against the grain.

Piero Vettori, writing in 1560, did not differ greatly from Robortello in his basic understanding of poetic origins. He too maintained that all poetry had originally been extemporaneous and unpremeditated, and he too thought that only the chorus sang, and only part of the time.³¹ However, Vettori rejected Robortello’s conclusion that the tragedy itself had originally existed in extemporaneous form, preferring the easier interpretation of the passage about tragedy coming “from the singers of the dithyramb.”³² As to the question of music, Vettori drew a conclusion that seemingly came directly from his information on the Roman comedy: he thought that Greek actors recited, or intoned (his term was *cantilena*), to the rhythm of a flute or lyre.³³ He carefully distinguished this kind of performance from true song (*canticum*), but his vision of a tragedy performed

²⁹ Robortello, *Explicationes*, 55.

³⁰ Ps.-Aristotle, *Problemata*, 19.48, 922b; Robortello, *Explicationes*, 124.

³¹ Pietro Vettori, *Commentarii in primum librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetarum* (1560; repr., Munich: W. Fink, 1967), 34, 18.

³² Vettori, *Commentarii*, 40–41.

³³ Vettori, *Commentarii*, 8.

with a continuous musical accompaniment set Vettori distinctly apart from Robortello. Similarly, Vettori saw Greek drama as standing in a direct relationship with Roman comedy, pointing out that once the chorus was eliminated from drama, as happened in the Roman comedy and in the New Comedy at Athens, the entire drama consisted simply of metrical speech.³⁴ But like Robortello, in the end, Vettori took no interest in radical speculation to fill the void of Aristotle's silence on the musical element in tragedy. Vettori too knew the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, one of which he deployed to draw a lesson about the chorus that differed from Robortello's, although Vettori also ignored the question whether anything more than the chorus was sung. Specifically, apropos the information from the *Problems* that in Phrynichus's time tragedy contained far more songs than verses recited by the actors, Vettori opined that Aeschylus, when he diminished the role of the chorus as the *Poetics* reported, had "corrected the error of his elders" such as Phrynichus and cured an aesthetic defect.³⁵ Given such assumptions—perhaps shaped by a dislike of *intermedi* in contemporary dramatic performance—it was natural for Vettori to equate "song" with "chorus" as a means of reconciling these two passages. It looks as if Vettori was less unable than simply unwilling to imagine a wider role for music in the tragedy.

Elsewhere, still concerned with aesthetic correctness, Vettori was capable of elucidating the tragedy's history (or so he claimed) by deploying his celebrated skill as a textual critic.³⁶ When Aristotle in the *Poetics* addressed the subject of cramming too much information into a tragedy, he mentioned tragedies entitled *Niobe* by both Aeschylus and Euripides; Vettori, however, was troubled by the report in an ancient biography of Aeschylus that Aeschylus's *Niobe* had featured Niobe sitting on the stage, veiled and mute, for three days.³⁷ Robortello, thinking of Aristotle's advice that a tragedy

³⁴ Vettori, *Commentarii*, 18.

³⁵ Vettori, *Commentarii*, 43.

³⁶ In the present context, see above all A. Porro, "Pier Vettori editore di testi greci: la *Poetica* di Aristotele," *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 26 (1983): 307–58; further, Monique Mund-Dopchie, *La survie d'Eschyle à la Renaissance: Éditions, traductions, commentaires et imitations* (Louvain: Peeters, 1984), 124–49; J. A. Gruys, *The Early Printed Editions (1518–1664) of Aeschylus: A Chapter in the History of Classical Scholarship* (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1981), 77–96; Raphaële Mouren, "Sébastien Gryphe et Piero Vettori: de la querelle des *Lettres familières* aux agronomes latins," in *Quid novi? Sébastien Gryphe à l'occasion du 450e anniversaire de sa mort*, ed. Raphaële Mouren (Villeurbanne: Enssib, 2008), 287–339; Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger* 1:52–68; Francesco Niccolai, *Pier Vettori (1499–1585)* (Florence: Succ. B. Seeber, 1912).

³⁷ *Life of Aeschylus*, in Vettori's edition of Aeschylus (Geneva, 1557), 1.

ought to unfold over no more than twenty-four hours, had proposed that perhaps Niobe really only sat on the stage for one day, while the previous two days were merely mentioned.³⁸ Vettori, who had edited Aeschylus himself three years before, had a more decisive solution: “in the very oldest and best manuscript,” he pointed out, the phrase in the biography read “until the third part,” that is, the third act of the play. Thus Niobe stood silent not for days but for a matter of mere hours.³⁹ Aristotle, apparently, could not be seen to praise a tragedy that violated his own precept from elsewhere in the *Poetics* (Vettori thought that the passage at hand meant Aeschylus’s *Niobe* was worthy of emulation whereas Euripides’s was not). This episode typifies the differences between Robortello and Vettori as commentators on the *Poetics*: Vettori was far more interested in textual questions and also much more eager to seek out problems that he could actively solve.⁴⁰ Still, for all their apparent conservatism on the music question, both Robortello and Vettori drew a conclusion not found anywhere in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, namely that the chorus sang at least in part.

It is instructive to compare these relatively careful approaches to Aristotle with those of two contemporary writers far less committed to philological scholarship, the musician Gioseffo Zarlino and the Aristotle commentator Lodovico Castelvetro. Zarlino, writing two years before Vettori in 1558, was apparently the first to propose unambiguously that the entire Greek tragedy was sung, including by the actors.⁴¹ Vettori had shown no sign that he was aware of Zarlino’s *Istitutioni harmoniche*, so that Vettori’s stance on the Greek chorus probably cannot be viewed as directly polemical. What distinguished Zarlino from the scholars Robortello and Vettori was his complete reliance on Roman sources and his strange dealings with Aristotle’s *Poetics* as he reached his novel conclusion. In this respect, Zarlino typified what Tigerstedt characterized as the usual fifteenth- and sixteenth-century response to Aristotle, “no systematic thinker but a collector and compiler, who with great diligence and little discernment

³⁸ Robortello, *Explicationes*, 217. For the 24-hour rule, Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b.

³⁹ Vettori, *Commentarii*, 186; he referred to the Mediceus, Laur.32.9. For an argument against this reading, found only in the Mediceus, Oliver Taplin, “Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 76 (1972): 57–97 at 61 n. 12.

⁴⁰ For further discussion, Porro, “Pier Vettori,” 316.

⁴¹ See Gioseffo Zarlino, *Le istitutioni harmoniche* (1558; repr., New York: Broude Brothers, 1965); on his career, Ann E. Moyer, *Musica Scientia: Musical Scholarship in the Italian Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 202–25; and Palisca, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*, 178–81, 298–301.

gathered together the fruits of a wide but indiscriminating reading.”⁴² In the first place, predictably, Zarlino presented extensive paraphrases of Donatus on comedy, emphasizing that the music was composed by a professional and explaining the meaning of the “left” and “right” flutes.⁴³ He then attributed to Aristotle (“come afferma il Filosofo”) the view that tragic and comic poets recited and sang their own compositions—an idea for which the *Poetics* offered no support whatsoever. Further, a story from Livy was glossed by Zarlino as the first introduction of actors to sing dramatic poetry instead of composers.⁴⁴ Finally, Zarlino appealed to a well-known passage from Horace’s *Art of Poetry* that had not, however, figured in previous discussions, although it was quoted in Donatus’s essay on comedy. According to Horace, the early tragedian Thespis had transported in a cart the players “who sang” (*qui canerent*) his dramas, which for Zarlino implied that both chorus and actors sang their parts.⁴⁵ A Vettori or Robortello would presumably have explained this passage on the assumption that early tragedy consisted mostly of choruses in any case, and might further have suggested that Horace’s account need not be taken as literal and exhaustive. The Aristotelian *Problems*, which we would regard as far more persuasive, were not used by Zarlino, suggesting that he did not know Robortello’s Aristotle commentary. On the other hand, Zarlino’s example shows that the dividing line between truly expert scholars like Robortello and Vettori and a more casual interpreter remained somewhat permeable in the middle sixteenth century: both resorted willingly to Roman sources when explaining Greek drama, and both readily drew inferences from Aristotle that were not strictly supported in the text of the *Poetics*.

In turn Lodovico Castelvetro, writing ten years after Vettori in 1570, took an even more vehement position than Vettori’s against the possibility that the speeches of the ancient drama had been sung.⁴⁶ Zarlino’s argument may have served to goad Castelvetro into his exceptionally polemical posture. Fundamentally, however, Castelvetro was perpetually seeking a way

⁴² Tigerstedt, “Reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics*,” 20; see also Bernard Weinberg, “From Aristotle to Pseudo-Aristotle,” *Comparative Literature* 5 (1953): 97–104, esp. 99–100.

⁴³ Zarlino, *Istitutioni*, 64.

⁴⁴ For Livius Andronicus, Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, ed. B. O. Foster et al., 14 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919–59), 7.2.

⁴⁵ Horace, *Opera*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, 4th ed. (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2001), *Ars poetica* 275–77. See Zarlino, *Istitutioni*, 62–63.

⁴⁶ Lodovico Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*, ed. Werther Romani, 2 vols. (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1978–79); a good discussion is Weinberg, “Castelvetro’s Theory of Poetics.”

to contradict Vettori, and he did so through a radical reinterpretation of the word “chorus,” which seems never to have found any adherents. The “chorus,” Castelvetro claimed, actually meant the actors who portrayed all of the speaking parts: as his evidence (so-called), he compared the word *grex* (“crowd”) in one of the prologues of Terence.⁴⁷ Then (Castelvetro continued), when Thespis, Aeschylus, and Sophocles had introduced “answerers” into the performance—this is, of course, usually taken to mean that they introduced actors—these new performers were actually musicians, who gave *intermedi* in a tragedy that continued to be wholly spoken (by the “chorus”). And in historical terms, these musical interludes were precisely what tragedy had “taken from the dithyramb.”⁴⁸ Somewhat to Castelvetro’s credit, he at least did not try to pretend that this was what Aristotle had actually meant. On the contrary, he explained, Aristotle was simply mistaken.⁴⁹

Far more formidable scholarly equipment was in the possession of Girolamo Mei, Piero Vettori’s student and assistant, who sided with Zarlino on the question of music in tragedy. In 1573, Vettori asked Mei what he thought of a certain passage in Aristotle’s *Politics* about the musical modes in which it was suitable for choruses to sing.⁵⁰ Mei sent to Vettori his manuscript treatise on musical modes, on which Mei had been working for five years, and which presented an anti-Vettori theory about music in the ancient tragedy. Mei’s treatise in general was based on unpublished Greek manuscripts on music; this dimension of Mei’s musical humanism has been well discussed by Claude Palisca and Ann Moyer.⁵¹ But for the subject that

⁴⁷ Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele*, 1: 119–20. Also cited in Hanning, *Of Poetry and Music’s Power*, 16.

⁴⁸ Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele*, 1: 116.

⁴⁹ Castelvetro, *Poetica d’Aristotele*, 1: 50: “Né ci lasciamo dare ad intendere che Aristotele intenda del coro, richiedendo l’armonia e ‘l ballo alla tragedia e alla comedia, percióché il coro non suona né balla, rappresentando azzione alcuna, come presuppone Aristotele.” For many more examples of Castelvetro’s castigations of the philosopher, Weinberg, “Castelvetro’s Theory of Poetics,” 350.

⁵⁰ Girolamo Mei, *Letters on Ancient and Modern Music to Vincenzo Galilei and Giovanni Bardi*, ed. Claude V. Palisca (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1960), 31.

⁵¹ For the exchange between Mei and Vettori, see Hanning, *Of Poetry and Music’s Power*, 16; on their scholarly relationship in general, see Mei, *Letters on Ancient and Modern Music*, 19–20, 23–31, 34–35; and Raphaële Mouren, “L’identification d’écritures grecques dans un fond humaniste: l’exemple de la bibliothèque de Piero Vettori,” in *I manoscritti greci tra riflessione e dibattito*, ed. Giancarlo Prato (Florence: Gonnelli, 2000), 433–41. The *De modis* is now published in an edition by Eisuke Tsugami (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 1991); nine manuscripts are known, and Mei’s autograph dedicated to Vettori is in the Vatican, MS lat. 5323. On Mei’s musical humanism, Moyer, *Musica Scientia*, 225–34; and Palisca, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*, 303–14, 348–52.

concerns us, those manuscript sources in fact offered no help. So, revisiting the whole ground of the history of comedy and tragedy as it had been considered during the sixteenth century, Mei argued that the Greek tragedy as well as the Old Comedy had been entirely sung to the music of flutes—except for tragic choruses, which were more complex musically because they contained varying rhythms, and in this respect resembled the dithyramb.⁵² This, then, was Mei's explanation of the key passage in Aristotle: it was specifically the tragic chorus that resembled the dithyramb, and that on account of its poetic meter. At least two aspects of Mei's method here are noteworthy. First, Mei extended his account from the tragedy to the Old Comedy and to the satyr drama, and he was evidently concerned to show that the resulting story was a legitimate and serious reading of Aristotle, most conspicuously through his discussion of the dithyramb. Secondly, what was the origin of the flutes to which Mei believed the Athenian drama had been sung? In fact, he had no Greek evidence at all, except for the tradition that elegiac poetry, like that of Mimnermus, had also been sung to flutes. This, however, was remote in time and in literary genre. It seems eminently plausible that Mei was actually thinking of the entire contemporary discussion of the Roman comedy which unfolded under the aegis of Donatus: the odd and even, left and right flutes to which Terence's comedies had apparently been performed in their entirety. If Mei considered it indecorous explicitly to mention his sources, however, his associate Vincenzo Galilei (Zarlino's pupil) had no such scruples: in Galilei's *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, which also circulated in manuscript, Galilei drew an explicit connection between the Greek tragedy and the manuscripts of Terence's comedies and their production credits, citing the Aristotelian *Problems* as well.⁵³

Zarlino's short comments and the manuscript musings of Mei and Galilei were eclipsed by the exuberant, maximalist treatise *Della poetica* by Francesco Patrizi da Cherso, a scholar who frequently attacked Aristotle and who enjoyed excavating Greek musical manuscripts as much as Mei and Galilei did.⁵⁴ The "decade" of the *Della poetica* that dealt with literary

⁵² Mei, *De modis*, book 4, 112–13.

⁵³ Hanning, *Of Poetry and Music's Power*, 17.

⁵⁴ Manuscripts: for example, Francesco Patrizi, *Della poetica*, ed. D. Aguzzi-Barbagli, 3 vols. (Florence: Istituto nazionale di studi sul rinascimento, 1969–71), 1: 311 n. 1 for Patrizi's quotation from a Venetian manuscript containing a fragment on rhythm attributed to Michael Psellus. (For the history and text of this fragment, see Aristoxenus, *Elementa Rhythmica*, ed. L. Pearson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990].) Patrizi's own Greek musical manuscripts are catalogued in Emil Jacobs, "Francesco Patrizi und seine Sammlung griechischer Handschriften in der Bibliothek des Escorial," *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 25 (1908): 19–47 at 36.

history appeared in 1586, as did a decade on individual disputed questions on poetics; five further decades were published only in the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Like Zarlino, Mei, and Galilei, Patrizi asserted that the entire Greek tragedy had been sung to music, adding that the Greek comedy had likewise been sung by actors and chorus. Aristotle's *Poetics* was of relatively little use for this argument, although Patrizi stressed that according to the *Poetics*, the "pleasing language" of the drama was characterized by "rhythm, harmony and melody"; he interpreted this melody as monodic song.⁵⁶ Patrizi's true evidence came from the Aristotelian musical *Problems* which Robortello and Vettori had known but had not followed to their logical conclusions. Patrizi in particular favored the problem asking why the chorus never sang in the hypodorian and hypophrygian modes, with the answer that these modes were "more proper to those on the stage, because they are imitative of heroes"; a closely related problem asked the same question and concluded "[b]ecause they do not have antistrophe, but they belong to the stage, because it is imitative."⁵⁷ By contrast, Patrizi entirely avoided any mention of Donatus on the comedy, not even speaking of tragedy being accompanied specifically by flutes, as Girolamo Mei had done. If Patrizi's poetic theory was elsewhere decisively anti-Aristotelian, in particular in his account of poetic inspiration as the foundation of poetry as opposed to Aristotle's "imitation," here on the subject of the ancient drama he relied heavily and respectfully on a text he supposed to be Aristotle's. Patrizi echoed the famous passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*, too, in his triumphalist account of the origin and progress of poetry. "So, from its birth poetry was sung"—Patrizi did not call it extemporaneous—and "through song it grew and became preëminent."⁵⁸ Happily appropriating Aristotle's teleological style of narration, he presented an innovative but by no means impossible reading of the *Poetics*, and did so primarily through Greek sources. If he avoided comparing the *Poetics* with Donatus, nonetheless, Patrizi was in no way averse to attempting to illuminate Aristotle by means of much later texts. Specifically, he adduced a long list of passages on the drama from Cicero; most of these were so totally irrelevant, in fact, that one suspects few readers can have taken them seriously. So even if Patrizi's

⁵⁵ The *Deca istoriale* is in Patrizi, *Della poetica*, vol. 1.

⁵⁶ Patrizi, *Della poetica*, 1: 331; Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b.

⁵⁷ Patrizi, *Della poetica*, 1: 328–29; ps.-Aristotle, *Les problèmes musicaux*, ed. F. A. Gevaert and J. C. Vollgraff (Ghent: A. Hoste, 1903), 19.48 (922b), 19.30 (920a); Patrizi also cited 19.31 (920a) and 19.6 (918a). Patrizi's use of the *Problems* is discussed in Palisca, *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*, 413–16.

⁵⁸ Patrizi, *Della poetica*, 1: 325.

primary inclination was to explicate Aristotle's *Poetics* by means of the *Problems* that he took to be Aristotle's, this did not prevent him from foraging for later information from the Roman world: the novelty of his Latin sources in the sixteenth-century discussion apparently seduced him into a strange detour from his ordinary practice.

All of these sixteenth-century accounts of the birth of drama must appear somewhat alien to the twenty-first-century student. The close kinship between Aristotle and Donatus, which to the sixteenth century seemed so obvious and so convenient, could by no means be taken for granted today—and *a fortiori*, neither could the sixteenth-century scholars' optimistic assumption about the kinship of Greek and Roman culture more broadly. That orientation of theirs, nonetheless, may have been the moment at which they most closely resembled Friedrich Nietzsche. He too assumed that where information was sparse, a bold exercise of the historical imagination was both justifiable and necessary.

The literary historians' distinctive approach to their sparse sources deserves reiteration. On the one hand preoccupied with explaining the earliest, extemporaneous origins of the drama, they found on the other hand that their latest source, Donatus, was in fact the most helpful of all, while the *Poetics* of Aristotle, an actual spectator of the Greek drama, offered no assistance—perhaps precisely because Aristotle took his readers' knowledge of performance practices for granted. At the same time, the humanists could draw notably different conclusions from the same sources: not only the *Poetics*, which was all but mute on the music question, but also the *Problems*, a quasi-technical text known to literary scholars and musicians alike. Meanwhile, in their concern to explain the ancient drama in its entirety, the humanists not only followed Donatus; they effectively recapitulated the lost whole of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which a second book on comedy had originally sat beside its first book on tragedy. Finally, from Poliziano to Patrizi, the humanists conceived of ancient drama as poetry to be performed and voiced, not as inert words confined to a page. In this imagination of a living poetic form, they again resembled Nietzsche, for whom tragic poetry contained the animating force of Greek life itself.

But the humanist literary historians were also visibly the predecessors of literary study today. Certainly, as Vettori in particular shows, they were concerned with aesthetics and literary form. At the same time, they viewed ancient literary culture as complex, multisited, and far broader than any individual poet they might study. Thus Poliziano, for example, chose to

study not only the complete ancient texts on which he lectured but also the lost Greek literary history that he reconstituted in his notes from later, biobibliographical sources such as Diogenes Laertius and the epigrams of the *Anthologia Planudea*.⁵⁹ The humanists also strove to draw conclusions that would allow them to transcend, or indeed to reconstruct, the shipwreck of antiquity—whether we hear Robortello arguing that poetry began as brief and extemporaneous or Patrizi arguing that it began as song. This desire, of course, was allied to the fact that the literary historians found the shipwreck attractive to begin with: as Leonard Barkan has put the point in the case of art, “The Renaissance found beauty in ruins.”⁶⁰ Finally, where tragedy was concerned, literary historians were obliged to deal in thoughtful ways with the works of Aristotle. In this respect, literary study can form part of the much greater story of early modern encounters with Aristotle, and hence part of one major story of early modern intellectual life in general. From that narrative neoclassical aesthetic criticism has been essentially excluded by consensus. Literary history, however, functioned differently. Serious scholars recognized on the one hand that Aristotle’s text formed constraints on the stories it was possible to tell—in this respect they differed from figures such as Castelvetro—but they decided, on the other hand, to aim for a more satisfying account of the drama by combining the *Poetics* with other ancient texts. In short, here Aristotle was treated less as an authority than as a source, an unavoidable starting point who inspired both respect and energetic supplementation. In a similar way, literary study today emphasizes context, comparison, and thoughtful inquiry into intertextuality; the worshipful exegesis of a single primary text is generally shunned. Both by the problems they defined and by the solutions they proposed, then, literary historians can expand the story of our own disciplinary origins even as they contribute to our understanding of the past.

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⁵⁹ See L. Cesarini Martinelli, “*De poesi et poetis*: Uno schedario sconosciuto di Angelo Poliziano,” in *Tradizione classica e letteratura umanistica: Per A. Perosa*, ed. Roberto Cardini et al., 2 vols. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), 2: 455–87; and Peter Godman, “Poliziano’s *Poetics* and Literary History,” *Interpres* 13 (1993): 110–209, esp. 161–67; also Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli*, 56–59.

⁶⁰ Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, 205.