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Matthew Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. I: Neglected Authors.* and *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. II: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.*

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Matthew Wright,
The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. I: Neglected Authors.

New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. 312. Paper
(ISBN 978-1-4725-6775-8) \$34.95.

Matthew Wright,
*The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Vol. II:
Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.*

New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. 330. Paper
(ISBN 978-1-4742-7647-4) \$26.95.

With these two volumes Matthew Wright performs a welcome service in presenting a clear and accessible guide to the fragmentary remains of ancient Greek tragedy. In addition to English translations of tragic fragments other than those written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (the first such collection), Wright provides critical overviews of the lost plays, situating each one with respect to the myth it enacts and with respect to other treatments. His thoughtful commentary along the way is often incisive and illuminating, making clear to the reader just why these fragments matter. Because there is very little of the Greek texts here, readers without Greek will be entirely at home, while those with the Greek texts at their sides will find that Wright's adherence to the numbering of Kannicht, Snell, and Radt (*Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 1971-2004) makes cross-reference easy. His discussions contain useful references to secondary sources, and a substantial bibliography appears at the end of each volume. Note that the scope of both volumes is limited to tragedy: satyric fragments are ignored. Fragments either unattributed or unassigned to a particular play are also omitted.

Volume 1 grounds the project in the sobering recognition that we know remarkably little about Greek tragedy, which Wright calls a "*lost genre*" (xii). It therefore behooves us, he argues, to take the fragments seriously and to realize that our

understanding of the genre hinges on doing so. Indeed, Wright's interest in drawing lessons about tragedy as a whole is one of this study's chief virtues. Wright also reflects thoughtfully on the hows and whys of studying fragments, and in doing so he enunciates 10 principles that guide his work. Two of these I highlight because they are both provocative and telling of Wright's methods. First, he advocates "micro-reading" which calls on us "to push the fragments to their limits and squeeze out every drop of meaning and nuance" (xxiv). Second, he claims that the study of fragments requires "creativity and imagination" because, like Roland Barthes' writerly texts, fragments turn readers into authors (xxv). Wright is an able guide here, although it should be noted that he eschews plot reconstruction.

Brief summaries of the chapters follow, with examples of the lessons drawn by Wright.

Chapter 1 ("The Earliest Tragedies") discusses Thespis, Choerilus, Pratinas, and Phrynichus in presenting a concise and appropriately skeptical survey of tragedy prior to 472, the date of the oldest surviving play, Aeschylus' *Persians*. Among the noteworthy observations here is that Aristophanes' parody of Phrynichus' choreography (*Wasps* 1476-1537) may suggest that Phrynichus' plays were being re-performed in Aristophanes' day (19).

Chapter 2 ("Some Fifth-Century Tragedians") treats seven authors, including Ion of Chios. Wright notes that a number of non-Athenian poets, such as Ion, competed at the City Dionysia, and Athenaeus reports that, following his victory, Ion sent Chian wine to the Athenians. Wright suggests that this report prompts us to rethink tragedy as a political institution: might such an act have been seen as "an obtrusion of non-Athenian values into a quintessentially Athenian event" (31-32)? More broadly, what did it mean for a non-Athenian to compete (and win!) at the City Dionysia?

Chapter 3 is devoted to Agathon. Taking up the difficulties involved in making use of comic evidence, Wright offers no fewer than 15 ways to make sense of the portrait of Agathon in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (67-69). He also notes that, according to Aristotle (*Poetics* 9), one of Agathon's plays (*Anthos* or *Antheus*) invents both events and characters and thereby poses the question, "How far from generic norms can a tragedy go while remaining a tragedy?" (82).

Chapter 4 ("Tragic Family Trees") studies more than a dozen poets from families with multi-generational involvement in tragedy: producing tragedies, it seems, was often "a family business" (91). Aeschylus' family, for example, included eight tragedians over six generations. Aeschylus' nephew Philocles wrote a tetralogy *Pan-dionis*, a fact that tells us not only that both he and Sophocles wrote plays about

Tereus, but also that “connected tetralogies with a single consecutive storyline were still being produced in the late fifth century” (99).

Chapter 5 (“Some Fourth-Century Tragedians”) surveys nine fourth-century tragic poets and concludes that “it is not possible to detect any significant changes or developments in the character of the tragic genre *as a whole* during the years up to 322 BCE” (120). This surprising conclusion supports Wright’s mission to show that the fragments can rectify misconceptions about tragedy. He does nonetheless concede that fourth-century tragedians might have differed from their fifth-century counterparts in having “a heightened sense of their own epigonal status” (120).

Chapter 6 (“The Very Lost”) reports what little is known about more than 30 playwrights whose work has completely disappeared. A handful of these poets are known only, or principally, from epigraphic sources.

The brief “Epilogue” draws some conclusions. Here Wright emphasizes the diversity of tragedy in the classical period, a genre characterized by the absence of “a single pattern, form or purpose” (199), as well as by continuity and stability. Wright also sees the fragments as putting into doubt some widely accepted beliefs about tragedy: the “substantial and growing presence of non-Athenian tragedians” testifies against the notion that tragedy was Athenocentric (200); trilogies and tetralogies may have been produced later than we think; sometimes a satyr-play was staged as the third play in a production, or a tragedy as the fourth. All of this may make us wonder, says Wright, “what the ‘normal’ competition rules were at any particular period” (201). The Epilogue concludes with a conspectus of classical plays and authors (including the canonical three), organized by title.

Four appendices contain translations of all attributed tragic fragments written by poets other than Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides; a glossary; a chronology of Greek theater history (534–322); and a guide to further reading.

Volume 2 devotes a chapter to each of the three canonical poets. Because this volume contains neither Greek nor English texts of the fragments, both readers with and those without Greek will want to have another edition such as the Loeb (Lloyd-Jones 1996; Collard and Cropp 2008; Sommerstein 2008) at hand. Although Wright’s discussions overlap substantially with those in the Loeb, his treatments of individual plays sometimes offer the reader more interpretive guidance and his narratives are generally more approachable for non-specialists.

This volume continues the project of drawing out the implications of the evidence. The Aeschylus of the fragments, for example, makes us rethink the poet we thought we knew: more than a dozen of his fragmentary plays are unlike any of his surviving works in that they contain “weird and grotesque subject-matter”

(15). Wright also shows that the notion of the “Sophoclean hero” is challenged by the fragments (67), and he observes that the thematic range of Sophocles’ plays may have been wider than commonly assumed (91), as evidenced by *Tyro’s* “happy” ending (125) or the comedy and “undignified subject matter” of *The Gathering of the Achaeans* (84). Although the Euripidean fragments display distinctive features familiar from the surviving plays, these fragments put into doubt “any overarching narratives about Euripides’ creative development over time” (140). The “fluid and provocative use of myth,” for example, often taken to be characteristic of late Euripides, is evident in his *Cretan Women* of 438 BCE (180). Wright also suggests that fragments from all three authors, with their surprising material such as “death, divination, magic and reincarnation” (39), may require that we “expand our definition of tragedy” (101-102).

Chapter 4 (“Unfamiliar Faces”) argues that myths cannot have definitive versions: fragmentary evidence shows that Oedipus need not blind himself, Medea need not kill her children, and Antigone need not die childless (212). “We may think we know and understand Antigone well,” says Wright, “but the evidence of fragmentary tragedy should make us think otherwise” (227).

Chapter 5 (“Lost Tragedies in Performance”) outlines an approach to the performance criticism of fragments, arguing (against Taplin) that the text does *not* necessarily contain instructions for significant stage action. Rather, we must sometimes resort to information *outside* the text. Wright articulates seven working principles of such criticism which he then puts to work in 12 case studies. His emphasis here on the “the *performance potential* of the material” is particularly noteworthy, along with his call to ask “How *might* a play have worked on stage?” (243). Making use of a late sixth-century vase, for example, Wright suggests that the chorus in Aeschylus’ *Daughters of Nereus* may have appeared “as if on dolphin-back” (250). He also thinks that the transformation of Tereus into a hoopoe may have been staged in Sophocles’ *Tereus* (251-53).

These volumes should have broad appeal. All will find Wright’s narratives highly readable and lucid. Specialists will want to engage with Wright’s working principles, as well as with his claims about the implications for our understanding of the tragic genre. Classicists without expertise in tragedy will find this work a convenient and approachable guide, although they will need another edition for translations of many fragments. Readers without classical training will also find in these volumes an accessible introduction to the subject.