I. Konzeptualisierungen

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Rags of Defeat

The Material Aesthetics of Competition in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* and the Athenian Theatre

Abstract

What were the aesthetics of defeat in ancient Greece, and how was failure in competition felt, framed, and represented within the culture? Such questions motivate and orient this chapter, which takes a materialist approach to a well-known scene from Aristophanes' *Acharnians* to explore and theorise failure's aesthetics in 5th-century Athens. In a self-consciously meta-theatrical scene, set at the fictionalised home of the real-life tragedian Euripides, stage properties and costumes (especially ragged outfits) act as the material basis of an extended critique of dramatic aesthetics. Since the exchange at Euripides' home has programmatic importance, not only within *Acharnians* but also within Aristophanic comedy as a whole, the staging and symbolism of these ragged costumes has been studied from numerous perspectives. This chapter breaks new ground in arguing that, beyond their distorted form, degraded materiality, and allusively layered semiotics, the rags' material presence in the playwright's home, where they commemorate his competitive failure in Athens' dramatic festivals, is an essential feature of their 'different aesthetics'. Euripides' rags confound conventional distinctions between playwright and character, subject and object, blurring mimetic and ontological lines so that the tragedian himself participates in the disgrace, dejection, and – ultimately – the defeat of his mythological heroes.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Defeat, Materiality, Aristophanes, Ancient Greece, Costume, Competition

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that competition, artistic and otherwise, entails complex and compelling material mediations that demand an aesthetic approach which is 'different', in crucial respects, from those traditionally applied to non-competitive activity.[1] Victory – like, its aesthetic analogue, beauty – has tended to be the focus of competition, but by taking a *via negativa* and attending to the broader scope of competition across both time and outcome, the aesthetic importance of defeat becomes evident, particu-

1 I would like to acknowledge this volume's editors, Daniela Wagner and Jan Stellmann, for their patience and unstinting support, and to thank the attendees of the Different Aesthetics conference in March 2022 for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All errors that remain are, naturally, my own.

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larly when considering the social and material legacies of competitive loss. By taking materials and their agency into consideration, the aesthetics of defeat may stand to offer a different perspective on longstanding issues in cultural criticism, including the early reception of Greek tragedy.

We may begin by establishing the terms and scope of our discussion in ways that highlight how competition engages with times and materials beyond the narrow limits of any given contest. The word 'competition', as the English lexicographer Samuel Johnson defined it in the middle of the 18th century, is "the act of endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time".[2] There are, naturally, different ways of delimiting competitive activity across language and culture. Etymologically, 'competition' is derived from the combination of the Latin verb prefix *com-*, 'jointly,' and verb *petere*, 'to seek'. Several modern languages employ words composed from these same roots, often alongside terms derived from Latin *currere*, 'to run,' (cf. French *concours*, etc.) – a lexical pattern that reflects the footrace as a conceptual metaphor for our understanding of competition across cultures.[3] Johnson's definition properly applies narrowly to the English-language concept, but it nevertheless highlights three archetypal features of competition: that competitors share with one another time, intent, and object.

Johnson's definition may articulate the common understanding of competition, but the concept is liable to extension. The synchronicity of competition – that the contest occurs between participants "at the same time" – for example, may be reframed. Runners often compete not only against others in the same race, but also indirectly against runners in other 'heats', parallel competitions held at different times. In our modern era, with the assistance of stopwatches and similarly precise metrics of time, runners compete against records set in earlier competitions, and, in some sense, may be said to compete against themselves. Competition, by its very nature, supports the collapsing and reframing of time. Nor is the object of competition necessarily fixed or stable. Even when the formal goal of a competition is fixed, different participants may compete with different objects in mind, as sometimes occurs when one team seeks a regular-season title while the opponent seeks to avoid elimination from a tournament. In such circumstances, the meaning of victory, itself, is dynamic and contextual. So, while Johnson's definition may highlight its most salient or paradigmatic features,

2 Johnson 1755, s.v. "competition".

3 Cf. Dutch 'concurrentie', Italian 'concorrenza', German 'Konkurrenz', Portuguese 'concorrência', etc. Other German terms derived from 'Wette' (cognate with English 'wager'), such as 'Wettbewerb', 'Wettkampf' (*vel sim.*), place emphasis on the object that is the competitors' goal. The ancient Greek lexicon of competition will be discussed below: see Scanlon 1983 for an overview of its origins. A globally comparative study of the concept would be illuminating. On conceptual metaphors, see Lakoff/Johnson 1980.

'competition' must ultimately be recognised as a flexible concept variously applicable across a wide range of activities and frameworks.

In its application, too, competition can be both varied and profound. Within the history of ideas, 'competition' has experienced a meteoric rise over the past two centuries. Today, it stands as a foundational concept in diverse fields from economics to ecology.[4] The heuristic appeal of competition is derived, in part, from the fractal-like quality of the concept, which may be applied to contests both narrowly and broadly defined. Individual organisms or commercial firms, for example, may be said to 'compete' for the same nutrients or capital, but competition also proves a robust concept when applied to such dynamic, layered, and complex systems as ecological habitats and global markets. Central to its conceptual power in this respect is competition's ability to reduce complex activities to a win-loss binary with a focus on the outcome of competition. When competition is applied extensively, such binarism may imply a closed 'zero-sum' process, wherein the benefits of victory stand in counterpoise to the disadvantages of defeat. But competition may also be detected across broader, overlapping systems of activity and evaluation, where it may produce substantial aggregate effects – an idea, as will be discussed below, recognised as early as the time of the archaic Greek hexameter poet, Hesiod. In both its narrow and extended applications, competition provides a mechanism for framing and assessing such properties as ability, merit, power, and possession.

While competition may be clearly delimited in theory, in practice it is hardly absolute but regularly entails broader material and social apparatuses. Practical examples of competition make these entanglements obvious. To return to the paradigmatic competition of the footrace, in the contest proper, competitors' activities, goals, and parameters are clearly demarcated. The course and stakes are predetermined, rules of fair play are established, and a starting time is announced and enforced. But the parameters that define the footrace all depend upon prior and consequent actions and states that extend beyond the limits of the contest itself. Among other things, the race must be advertised and organised, runners must train and rest, awards must be established and conferred, and records must be kept, formally or otherwise. In athletics, too, competition is endlessly complexified or simplified. The basic units of competition (e.g., points in a single match, wins and losses over a season) may be aggregated or dissected to determine winners and losers across a variety of scales. One competition feeds into another, sometimes almost imperceptibly. Our phenomenological experience of sport reveals that we take these dynamics into account, albeit in often vague or logically inconsistent ways. Mathematically, a point scored in the first minutes of a match contributes no less than a last-second, go-ahead goal. And yet the experience of these events is almost entirely dif-

4 The two fields often borrow metaphors from each other: for an overview of biological competition, see especially Keddy 2001. The reliance on competition as an explanatory heuristic, in ecological contexts and elsewhere, is coming under increasing scrutiny: see, for example, McPeek 2022, p. 16.

ferent.[5] That is to say, competitions framed in one way may be experienced in another, with the consequence that no single competition – from a contested possession of a ball to the match or season as a whole – is wholly outside the extensive framework of the competitive event. Conceptually – and as we shall see, materially as well – competition is difficult to contain.

To this day, athletics remain for many the archetypal contest, but competition has long been a feature of the arts as well. This is perhaps most obvious where artistic assessment is clearly delimited and rule-bound, such as in the presentation of new works in a dramatic festival.[6] Even outside formal competitions, there appears to be an abiding urge to judge art ordinally and, in some cases, to recognise winners and losers officially. Such rankings of artistry may be accomplished through explicit formal criteria or adjudication, or, as in sport, through quantitative reduction.[7] Whereas the express project of Enlightenment-era aesthetics was to divorce artistic taste from circumstance (and, insofar as possible, materiality itself), our 'postmodern' aesthetic turn of the past half-century has been characterised by a sense of contingency and contamination in which aesthetics are firmly anchored to objective realities and affective disposition.[8] Not only are today's aesthetic judgments unapologetically affected by external factors, but values forged in a competitive contexts also routinely determine the criteria of evaluation in general and the contours of our affective response. The glory of victory and agony of defeat are not felt exclusively in the transitory, climactic moment of competition proper. They suffuse and permeate the many agents and objects involved in competition as well.

Modern scholars, following the work of the Swiss art historian and cultural theorist Jacob Burckhardt, have maintained an abiding interest in competition as practiced and theorised by the ancient Greeks.[9] While these studies sometimes overemphasise the singular quality of ancient Greek competition, it is nevertheless true that certain Greek contests, from the Olympic Games to the dramatic competitions at the City Dionysia in Athens, left indelible cultural legacies. Much attention has been paid to the winning of

5 For a phenomenologically informed discussion of the aesthetics of sport, see Gumbrecht 2006.

6 Competition has a particular focus of scholarly discussion on Old Comedy: see especially Biles 2011; for a materially-sensitive exploration of failure in comedy, see especially Telò 2016, pp. 88–121.

7 Some modern aesthetic theories, perhaps most famously that espoused by Scottish empiricist David Hume in *On the Standard of Taste*, imply or depend upon such comparisons and aggregations of experience across individuals and over time. On the history of post-Enlightenment aesthetics, see especially Guyer 2005.

8 Shusterman 1989 offers a nearly contemporary summary of the joint impact of the work of Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and Richard Rorty.

9 J. Burckhardt's 1999 [1872] ideas concerning "the agonal spirit" of the Greeks would be changed and more widely disseminated in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche: see especially the chapters by Müller 2019 and Robertson 2019 in Siemens / Pearson 2019. See also L. Burckhardt 1999.

these competitions, with its associated rituals of religious dedication and popular commemoration. The physical legacies of defeat, too, offer a broader picture of these contests and suggest ways in which competition, itself, shapes aesthetics in unexpected ways.

In this chapter, I borrow insights from materialist analyses to outline an aesthetics of defeat based upon the physical legacies of competition that extend far beyond the contest proper, anchoring and affecting the discussion and memory of the context within broader, enduring frameworks of competition. New materialist ways of thinking, which have come to academic prominence over the past two decades, have drawn attention to the ways objects actively, almost agentively, affect the world. In her 2010 book, "Vibrant Matter. The Political Ecology of Things", Jane Bennett draws upon a long history of materialist thought, from Baruch Spinoza to Bruno Latour, to explore the "peculiar efficacy"[10] of matter, even (if not especially) in unlikely and disreputable places. Finding inspiration in both the agglomeration of discarded objects and the phenomenological perspectives of Henry David Thoreau and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bennett opens her study by reflecting upon her experience of observing a collection of trash in the roadway. "In this assemblage", Bennett writes, "*objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics".[11] Persisting beyond their 'intended' economic use, these items came to have new meanings, and continued efficacy, in the various permutations of their continued rearrangement. For Bennett, discarded materials reveal, in particular, "that a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity".[12] Bennett offers an alternate perspective on 'trash' aesthetics, attentive not simply to the quality of an (art) object's production, but also to the meaning and value of 'things' beyond their ostensibly intended use. Bennett does not expressly or directly engage with competition in her book, but her attention to modern (American) materialism's relentless consumption outlines an analogous dynamic, wherein materials exert physical and symbolic power beyond their function within systems of economic competition. Formal and artistic contests, too, leave 'discarded and unwanted' commodities behind, and the persistence of these objects shapes the enduring and evolving meaning of competition.

Before taking a modern, Bennettian approach to the aesthetics of defeat in Greek drama through a study of its discarded materials, I begin by sketching a culturally interior (what anthropologists might call emic) perspective on the aesthetics of competition in ancient Greece, drawn from both traditional accounts of competition, as encoded in our earliest Greek poetry, as well as from athletic contests, which from the Archaic period onwards remained for Greeks an archetypal form of competition. The Greek

10 Bennett 2010, p. 9.
11 Bennett 2010, p. 5 (original emphasis).
12 Bennett 2010, p. 6.

discourse of competition – and especially its concern with the emotions and affective states experienced when *contending for* and *succeeding* or *failing* to take the prize of victory – suggests a coherent cultural modality or mood of defeat, even as our visual and material evidence privilege the experience of victory. I propose that a material analogue to the Greek vocabulary of defeat is ragged clothing, materials that not only symbolise abjection but also, as physically degraded fabrics themselves, instantiate the physical effects and affective mood of defeat. The chapter proceeds to explore how overlapping cultural networks of actors and objects create a phenomenologically 'thick' experience of defeat, which presents complex yet discernible patterns of material agency. Applying these new materialist insights to 5th-century Athenian drama, I offer a case-study of the aesthetics of defeat in which things no less than words, and ideas no less than people, engage in ongoing, layered, and fractal-like competitions across time and genre.

2. Eris, Nikē, and Rags. The vocabulary of competition and the material aesthetics of defeat in ancient Greece

Ancient Greek notions of competition, despite their modern cultural and scholarly influence, differ in important ways from prevailing modern notions of competition. Discontinuities between past and present are perhaps most evident in terms of vocabulary.[13] In a study of the earliest Greek lexicon of competition, as it appears in the epic hexameter poems traditionally ascribed to Homer, Thomas Scanlon has traced the semantics of the terms *agōn* and *aethlos*, two core concepts for the Greek sense of athletic and related competitions, in order to illuminate archaic social attitudes toward competition. Based upon his survey, Scanlon connects *agōn*, perhaps the most general term for competition in Greece, primarily to social processes of local assembly and leadership. *Aethlos*, the etymological root of 'athletics', Scanlon ties to "strenuous, competitive activity for a goal".[14] Attending to the emotional aspects of competition across these two terms, Scanlon observes a paradoxical connection between the physical struggles involved in competition and the delight taken in spectators' viewing or athletes' reflecting upon events which required significant "hardship and suffering" during the contest itself.[15] Of the Phaeacian games presented in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, for instance, Scanlon writes, "It is the pervasive joy of competition which distinguishes these 'contests' in spirit from the 'toils' of war or life, and from 'trials' with serious stakes."[16] Joy may have pervaded

13 On the vocabulary of competition in Greece in general, see Franciò 2000. On agonistic vocabulary in Aristophanes, see Campagner 2001.

14 Scanlon 1983, p. 158.

15 Scanlon 1983, pp. 158 f.

16 Scanlon 1983, p. 158.

among spectators and winners, but the violent threats of disadvantaged competitors, as well as the grumblings of those who failed to place first, suggest competition was taken neither as an absolute activity, cleanly separated from other interpersonal struggles, nor an unalloyed good.[17] In keeping with the fractal-like nature of competition, wherein contests held in one arena spill readily over into others, a heated debate erupts in Book 23 of the *Iliad* over the awarding of prizes after the conclusion of the athletic contests proper. Disagreements over competitors' behaviour and merit lead to bartering, deferential speeches, and other instruments of social competition and cohesion.[18] In short, although Greek narratives of competition observed in Homer, Pindar, and elsewhere may not have typically dwelled upon the defeated, they at least recognised the interactions between the emotions and material consequence of loss.

Athletic competitions were the basis, but hardly the limit, of ancient Greek notions of competition. *Eris*, 'strife', a term not typically applied to athletic competition (and therefore outside Scanlon's survey), is nevertheless crucial for establishing a holistic impression of the nature of competition, of "endeavouring to gain what another endeavours to gain at the same time," to recall Johnson's definition, in our earliest Greek literary evidence. As Hesiod relates near the opening of his didactic hexameter poem, *Works and Days*:

οὐκ ἄρα μοῦνον ἔην Ἐρίδων γένος, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
εἰσὶ δύω· τὴν μέν κεν ἐπαινήσειε νοήσας,
ἡ δ' ἐπιμωμητή· διὰ δ' ἄνδιχα θυμὸν ἔχουσιν.
ἣ μὲν γὰρ πόλεμόν τε κακὸν καὶ δῆριν ὀφέλλει,
σχετλίη· οὔ τις τήν γε φιλεῖ βροτός, ἀλλ' ὑπ' ἀνάγκης
ἀθανάτων βουλῇσιν Ἔριν τιμῶσι βαρεῖαν.
τὴν δ' ἑτέρην προτέρην μὲν ἐγείνατο Νὺξ ἐρεβεννή,
θῆκε δέ μιν Κρονίδης ὑψίζυγος, αἰθέρι ναίων,
γαίης [τ'] ἐν ῥίζῃσι καὶ ἀνδράσι πολλὸν ἀμείνω·
ἥ τε καὶ ἀπάλαμόν περ ὁμῶς ἐπὶ ἔργον ἐγείρει·
εἰς ἕτερον γάρ τίς τε ἴδεν ἔργοιο χατίζων
πλούσιον, ὃς σπεύδει μὲν ἀρόμεναι ἠδὲ φυτεύειν
οἶκόν τ' εὖ θέσθαι· ζηλοῖ δέ τε γείτονα γείτων
εἰς ἄφενος σπεύδοντ'· ἀγαθὴ δ' Ἔρις ἥδε βροτοῖσιν.
καὶ κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει καὶ τέκτονι τέκτων,
καὶ πτωχὸς πτωχῷ φθονέει καὶ ἀοιδὸς ἀοιδῷ.[19]

17 Nestor's son, Antilochos, threatens his horses with death if they win a 'lesser prize' (χεῖρον ἄεθλον [*cheiron aethlon*], Hom. Il. 23,413) Menelaos complains as he is dangerously passed in the chariot race, Hom. Il. 23,438–441.

18 Hom. Il. 23. Similarly among the Phaiacians in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, the rules of social competition demand that Odysseus receive a gift from Eurymalos.

19 Hes. erg. 10–25. I follow the Greek text of Solmsen, see Hes. erg.

For, after all, there was not one type of Eris (Strife) upon the earth, but
two: one a man would praise, having considered her,
the other he would blame; they have entirely different natures.
For the one supports baneful war and conflict:
she is merciless, and her no mortal loves, but through necessity
and the will of the immortal gods, men pay honour to this heavy Eris (Strife).
The other one dark Night bore first, and the high-throned
son of Cronos, dwelling in the sky, set her
among the roots of the earth, and she is much better for men,
and she goads even the helpless man to work.
For whoever, being idle, looks at some other man –
a rich one who hastens to plough and sow
and set his house in good order – him he idles, and neighbour
envies his neighbour, hastening after wealth. This Strife is good for mortals:
and potter begrudges potter, and builder builder,
and beggar envies beggar, and poet poet.[20]

War and conflict, as Scanlon and many others have noted, are metaphorically connected to athletic contests, often described with the same terms, including *agon, aethlos,* and their derivatives.[21] In depicting this second, productive kind of Eris or Strife, Hesiod invokes adversarial relations which, because they are not necessarily conducted in a shared time or location, his fellow Greeks might not have typically categorised under the rubric of formal competition. Comparing figures such as poets (for whom there were formal competitions) with potters and builders, among whom informal commercial competition most likely predominated, Hesiod establishes the 'better' (*ameinos*, V. 18) Eris as an ennobling, enriching cultural practice. For Hesiod, this better Eris leads not simply to human labour (*kai apalamon* [...] *epi ergon egeirei*, V. 19), but to material production, an emphasis made all the stronger through contrast with the destructive power of 'baneful' (*kakos*, V. 13) war and conflict associated with the 'merciless' Eris. Hesiod shifts focus from the competition itself to its durable realities, placing little emphasis on the merit, artistry, or even quality of the material output and attending instead to the aggregate 'wealth' (*plousios*, V. 21; *aphenos*, V. 23) that flows from this effort.

Despite positive economic effects, negative affective states are prevalent in Hesiod's account of this second, 'better' Eris. Because of this goddess, men are jealous (*zēloun*, V. 22), bear grudges (*kotein*, V. 24), and feel envy (*phthonein*, V. 25), a collection of affective dispositions which Sianne Ngai, in exploring our modern aesthetic sensi-

20 All translations are by me, A.C.D., unless stated otherwise.

21 Scanlon 1983, p. 159, makes this observation. For a fuller discussion with more recent bibliography, see Pritchard 2013.

bilities, has called 'ugly feelings'.[22] Similar to the paradox Scanlon finds in the experience of athletic competition among Homeric competitors, the economic output of this 'better' Eris has positive value, even as the affective experience of participants are, on the whole, painful. Wealth may have been associated with royalty, leisure, and vain pursuits in early Greek literature, but its accumulation, Hesiod suggests, could be a rather sordid process.[23] Victory may be an abstract, beautiful, and pure concept, but the practical matter of striving for it can be dirty, not only in such physical acts as ploughing fields or throwing pots, but in the art of poetry as well. Hesiod connects artisans, and by extension art itself, with the ugly emotions of Eris, dissolving distinctions between raggedly dressed beggars and splendidly attired poets, such as himself. By attending to the aggregate social effects of competition rather than the outcome of any given contest, Hesiod offers an aesthetics of competition different from that of the Homeric, athletic type studied by Scanlon. Hesiod encourages his audience to look beyond athletic archetypes to interrogate how resources and affective states jointly motivate activity and creation, sketching out an aesthetics wherein emotions and materials are closely entwined.

We may turn, now, from general discussion of competition in early Greek thought to focus specifically upon defeat, victory, and their cultural meanings and associations. Work towards a general aesthetics of defeat has, at least to my knowledge, not yet been written. The aesthetics of victory, defeat's positive counterpoint, however, have been much discussed, perhaps in no context more than in ancient Greece and Rome, where the winged goddesses Nikē and Victoria, respectively, were prominent symbols of competitive success.[24] A divinely beautiful female figure dressed in elegant robes, Nikē emblematised and, in an exceptional number of examples from the painted and plastic arts, iconographically personified victory both on the battlefield and in peace-time competition.[25] Her beauty, clothing, gender, wings, and the situational context of her appearance often suffice to identify Nikē, who is regularly depicted besides (or, when

22 See Ngai 2005. Verdenius 1985, p. 25, cautions that, "[w]hether jealousy [sc. *zēloun*] is good or bad [...] depends on its results, not on the kind of feeling which is behind it", but linking ζηλοῦν [*zēloun*] with the verbs κοτεῖν [*kotein*] and φθονεῖν [*phthonein*], Hesiod calls to his audience's mind the 'ugly' side of jealousy, even as he recognises this is the 'better' form of Eris.

23 The moral and conceptual ambivalence of wealth is a common theme, from the elegiacs of the Athenian lawgiver Solon to Aristophanes' *Wealth*. On the latter, see Konstan / Dillon 1981.

24 The iconography of Roman Victoria draws heavily upon Greek precedent but evolved its own peculiarities over time. On Roman Victoria in the archaeological record, see esp. Hölscher 1967.

25 Because of her unique and important iconographic function, Nikē is one of the most frequently represented Greek divinities. Aliki Moustaka, Alexandra Goulaki-Voutira and Ursula Grote collect, categorise, and analyse 730 representations under the heading of "Nikē" in LIMC 1981–1999, vol. 6.1 (1992), pp. 850–904. The goddess is depicted in many positions and forms, and an exception may almost always be found for any 'rule' about her presentation. On the depiction of Nikē and athletes in victory monuments, see Raschke 1988 and Rausa 1994. For a recent summary of work on Nikai, see Lagogianni-Georgakarakos 2021.

she is in miniature form, perched just above or on top of) a victorious individual, either human or divine.[26] Nikē sometimes accompanies or mirrors the victorious action itself, collapsing temporal distinctions between competition and commemoration and material distinctions between activity and product. Nikē is also depicted actively engaged in commemorating, announcing, or sanctifying victory, erecting monuments (*tropaia*), sounding trumpets, or pouring ritual offerings. Sometimes she holds a lyre, a prominent object of musical competition, or drives a chariot, the most spectacular and aristocratic of athletic competitions in the Greek world.[27] When she is not holding the reins or sitting upon a victor, Nikē is frequently presented in motion, an iconographic trope that may reflect both the dynamism of competition and the sudden arrival of victory.

In addition to her own corporeal form and significant activities, Nikē often presents material symbols of victory, such as a palm frond (*phoinix*) for the hand, a vegetal crown (*stephanos*) or cloth band (*tainia*) for the head, or even a bronze tripod, a traditional prize (*athlon*) with fungible economic as well as symbolic value.[28] Nikē is sometimes shown involved in converting objects that were a practical part of competition into a lasting memorial to victory, such as battle-field *tropaia*, for which spoils gathered from the defeated enemy could be reconstituted by the victors into a lasting monument. In peacetime competitions, too, objects that were instrumental in the contest (e.g., *diskoi* and *halteres* at Olympia, theatrical masks in Athens) might be dedicated in victory.[29] Through this sacralisation, these items were symbolically lifted from the realms of mortal competition and practical economic circulation into the immutable divine sphere of victory. In her visual representation, Nikē captures various aspects of the aesthetics of victory in classical Greece, particularly its association with individuals (especially in peacetime competition, where a sole winner might be expected) and its blurring of the instrumental, symbolic, and religious value of the materials featured in competition. In Nikē, Greeks visualised the abstract concept of victory at the intersection of the material with the symbolic, of competition and its commemoration. Nikē

26 Nikē is usually, but not always, winged (cf. LIMC 1981–1999, s.v. "Nikē", vol. 6.1 [1992], pp. 850–904, here p. 902: "Nikē Apteros"). Like the beautifully winged male figures Erōs (erotic love) and Himeros (desire), Nikē is represented as operating not only alongside, but also directly upon, other deities. Eros was a topic of discussion from Plato's *Symposium* to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and beyond; outside epinician odes, however, Nikē was rarely so thematised in literature, despite her significance in the visual record.

27 On Greek charioteers and their aristocratic associations, see Nicholson 2005. Α τρόπαιον (*tropaion*), 'trophy', was a monument made to commemorate an enemy's defeat (τροπή [*tropē*]), and originated as a suit of enemy armor set upon a stake. For more on this practice, see Strong 2012; on the complex representational and material significance of the *tropaion*, see Lenain 2019. Battlefield spoils might also become athletic prizes, as Achilles uses the armor of the fallen Trojan warrior, Sarpedon, at Hom. Il. 23,798–810.

28 On the tripod as prize, see Hom. Il. 23,259.

29 On athletic dedications, see Ebert 1972; on the dedication of theatrical equipment, see Green 1982.

was so frequently depicted because she offered an iconographic shorthand for the ways objects and signs worked together to produce and promulgate victory.[30]

In her personified form and material associations, Nikē stands as one of the preeminent icons of classical antiquity. For all her unique iconographic features, the goddess instantiates the cult of beauty in classical-era Greece, when physical appearances were conflated with other metrics of value and personal worth, such as social rank and moral probity. The aesthetics of competition overlapped significantly with those of class and similar social distinctions. Competition often pitted elite individuals against one another, so that victory became, sometimes quite literally, a crowning achievement of aristocratic life which might be taken as an indicator of, or proxy for, other distinctions.[31] Nikē's cultural prominence as a personification in visual art suggests that aesthetic evaluation was, for Greeks, effectively inseparable from competition. Victory, itself, was 'beautiful', an object not only of respect and emulation but also adoration.

If Nikē represents the positive side of competition, what did failure look like to the Greeks, and how was it embodied and materialised? These questions require an aesthetic approach along a *via negativa*, since defeat, for reasons both obvious and subtle, was rarely intentionally reproduced or commemorated. An aesthetics of failure is to be sought not in unified ideals or figures, but in the absences, interstices, and shadows. The Greek lexicon closest to such English words as 'failure' or 'defeat' (e.g. *hamartia, hēssa, ptaisma, sphalma,* and their related verbal forms) enjoyed little to no iconographic representation in visual art, and certainly nothing on a par with personified Nikē.[32] Greeks' aversion to facing defeat can be observed linguistically, too, where competitive failure is rendered through passive constructions with remarkable consistency (evident in verbs such as *hēssasthai, sphallesthai*).[33] Those who fail in competition are rarely described in

30 On the economics of symbolic and material discourses of victory, see especially Kurke 1991.

31 On the power and complexity of social distinction, see Bourdieu 1984.

32 Emotions that today might be readily associated with competitive loss, such as shame (cf. Greek αἰδώς [aidōs]), anger (ὀργή [*orgē*], χόλη [*cholē*], μῆνις [*mēnis*], etc.), or even madness (μανία [*mania*]), were rarely associated with Greek competition despite often having rich independent iconographic traditions that paralleled their verbal use. On the correspondence between visual and verbal reference to αἰδώς, see Ferrari 1990; on such parallelism generally, see Small 2003. This is not to say that negative ideas were not thus represented; the personified figure perhaps closest to modern notions of 'defeat' is Eris. As observed in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, competition, itself, entailed feelings (jealousy, etc.) that might today be associated primarily with loss. Hubert Giroux (LIMC 1981–1999, s.v. "Eris", vol. 3.1 [1986], pp. 846–850, here p. 849) notes that Eris could be depicted wherever discord was present, from military combat to non-violent competition, concluding that Eris "était probablement la plus connue de toutes les personnifications en rapport avec la guerre ou la dispute, autres que la victoire".

33 'Failing' or 'losing' in non-competitive endeavours is presented in the active voice by such verbs as ἁμαρτάνειν [*amartanein*], but this vocabulary is rarely used in where one's defeat is predicated upon the success of another, overtly or otherwise.

the Greek active voice, as in English 'losers', but rather through passive expressions such as 'the defeated' or 'the conquered' (*nikōmenoi*) – in other words, those subject to others' victory.[34] In competitive contexts it was as if agency, itself, was a property of winning. Perhaps as a result of this passive cultural and linguistic framing, distinctions were not always made between types or degrees of loss: Panhellenic 'crown' athletic competitions, such as those at Olympia and Delphi, typically eschewed the recognition of places beyond the victor.[35] Losing (or, in the case of match-fixing, winning) through deception or cheating incurred particular disrepute, a penalty materialised in Olympia through the forced erection of statuettes of Zeus known as Zanes.[36] But a noble loss to an exceptional opponent was still disheartening, even if it was not disgraceful. Contestants were expected to abide by both the rules and decisions of judges, but the feelings of anguish, indignancy, or inadequacy which accompanied loss were recognised and imagined, from Homeric narratives to the Hellenistic-era collection of 'poet's lives', as exerting a powerful and enduring effect on a competitor's psyche.[37]

Nor is defeat to be easily and positively sought in the material record. Those defeated in formal competition were not given symbolic tokens, analogous to fronds and crowns of victory, to mark or commemorate their loss. While winners privately accrued and publicly dedicated materials in ritual transactions formally integral to, or socially dependent upon, competition, losers, we might infer, shrank away into a quiet obscurity, unpunctuated by the symbolic transfer of materials. However, this is not to say that the defeated were not materially affected by loss. Competitive 'loss', as the English term suggests, may result in the forfeiture of one's goods. As we have observed, the defeated in war, in heroic epics and historical battlefields alike, had their weapons removed, a denuding of the body signalled the winner's dominance and the losers' passivity, in addition to the value of these materials as commodities. The spoils of war might be worn by the victor, publicly paraded, set as a reward, and religiously dedicated, or they might be scrapped, melted down, and incorporated into new material forms. In short, losing materials were regularly appropriated by winning individuals in a trans-

34 Compare the similar use of the passive Latin substantive participle, *victus*. Even the lexically active expression of defeat (ἥσσα [*ēssa*]) was a later back-formation from the passive verb, ἡσσάομαι [*ēssaomai*], see Beekes 2009, s. v. ἦκα (*ēka*), p. 513.

35 Musical competitions, however – as well as certain contests with fungible 'cash' prizes, including the Panathenaic Games in Athens – ranked top places. On the judging of Athenian dramatic competitions, see Marshall / Willigenburg 2004.

36 On the Zanes at Olympia, see RE 1894–1980, s. v. "Zanes" (Hans-Volkmar Hermann), supplementary vol. 14 (1974), pp. 977–981. Cheating in competition, however, was not always looked upon severely, as the mythical chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus, narrated in Pindar's *Olympian 1*, suggests.

37 On the effect of competitive loss in later narratives of the poet Euripides' life, see Stevens 1956 and Hanink 2016.

ference that converted items which brought grief or shame to the defeated into tangible and enduring extensions of the victors' pride and power. Winners did not always 'take all', of course. In peaceful contests, defeated Greek athletes retained their kit, citharodes kept their lyres, and theatre-makers held onto their costumes and masks after the festival. The meaning and affective qualities of these items, however, was irrevocably altered through their participation in competition. If things went especially wrong in competition, objects might be blamed for the outcome, as famously occurred in the conviction of a javelin which fatally struck a bystander at an athletic event.[38] But such exceptions prove the rule that, while winning objects might be dedicated with much fanfare, those involved in competitive loss were quietly reused, retired, or reincorporated into other objects. Those seeking an aesthetics of competitive loss through its material legacies are compelled, not unlike Jane Bennett, to see the vibrancy of this material in the agglomeration of quotidian assemblages, in trash, and in the informal archives of the material vestiges of our past selves.

Apparent documentary gaps do not, then, in themselves, indicate that ancient Greeks lacked the means or will to visualise, verbalise, or materialise defeat. The comparatively negative concept of Eris may not have enjoyed the same iconographic prominence as Nikē, but the emotional experience of failure was expressed through an affective vocabulary of misery that overlapped significantly with that of competition. For such a lexicon, one need look no further than tragedy, where competition is rarely so formally defined or zero-sum as in war or sport, but where various forms of failure – from mistaken identities and deeds, the death of family members and friends for whom one is responsible, etc. – are regularly associated with feelings of anguish and dejection. Tragic heroes call attention to their abject circumstances through the use of generically-marked vocabulary, using self-referentially such words as *talas*, *schetlios*, and *athlios*, the semantic range corresponds roughly to English 'wretched', 'miserable', 'suffering'. The last term, *athlios*, is particularly significant, since its etymological connection to athletics would remain manifest even as the word came, in the 5th century and beyond, to refer to misery in nearly any context. Tragic misery is rarely the result of failure in formal contest – even if the suffering hero or heroine is framed as an athlete – but in its magnitude and quality, it invites comparisons, explicit or otherwise, with the experience of competitive defeat.[39] Words spring from actors' mouths and evanesce on the stage as soon as they are uttered, making them ideal indicators of the sudden reversals of fortune (Greek *peripiteiai*) for which tragedy was famous.[40] Tragic charac-

38 As reported in Antiphon's *Second Tetralogy*; for a recent discussion, see Kamtekar / Nichols 2022.

39 Among many other examples, the chorus of Asian maenads in Euripides' *Bacchae* falsely flatter Pentheus' mother, Agave, as returning with a 'victory prize' (νικηφόρος [*nikēphoros*], Eur. Bacch. 1200).

40 Cf. Aristot. poet. 11,1452a22–29; on the narrative suddenness and discontinuity, see Belfiore 1988.

ters, however, do not always experience defeat on stage or in unfolding dramatic time. Some arrive already in misery – as notably occurs with Sophoclean title characters, including Ajax, Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus (at Colonus) – having previously been struck down by 'opponents' mortal or divine. The materials of victory, as observed in the iconography of Nikē, are often additive, further adorning victory; defeat works in the opposite direction, 'dressing down' characters, sometimes quite literally, by stripping them of their insignia and proper clothing and with it, metaphorically, their social standing.[41] In some cases, nudity might be considered the ultimate form of abjection, but for complex reasons of practicality and generic convention, this was not practiced on the Greek stage.[42] It was therefore perhaps not coincidental that defeated characters in tragedy were, whenever possible, dressed in rags, a unique set of fabrics that collapsed time between past and present while similarly blurring distinctions between object and character, clothing and costume. I propose here that rags served not only as generic symbols of defeat on the stage, but also as affective vehicles for transmitting past failure, with all of its emotional and causal messiness, into the dramatic present.

Rags are, by definition, degraded material. A rag cannot simply be made; its material becoming entails both creation and destruction. Fibres, first spun and woven into integral fabric, are worn, torn, and soiled over time. Rags both imply and materially record trauma. Ragged clothes are often associated intimately with their human wearers, who may be either agents (as in ritual lament) or fellow objects (as with poverty) of the destructive forces at work on the material. Rags, however, mediate and blur even these causal distinctions: lament is a scripted response to external grief, while poverty, at least in the cases of Euripides' and Sophocles' Electras, may be conceived of as a partially voluntary state.[43] Rags' threadbare nature, their gaps, perforations, and transparencies confound simple boundaries between body and fabric. As portable and transferrable clothing, rags need not share their traumatic history with their wearer: as a result, rags simultaneously attest to the authenticity of the suffering of their wearer while calling attention to their own potential as disguise.[44] Rags constitute a unique set of materials, associated with competitive defeat, that were capable of mediating complex relations of suffering and self-representation on multiple levels.[45] These associations, I contend, informed the experience of dramatic performance, where audience members are inevitably (if not always fully) aware of the independent object histories of the things and

41 In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, for example, Cassandra instantiates the practical defeat of her prophetic skill by stripping herself of her insignia: on this aspect of tragic costume, see Wyles 2011, p. 66.

42 (Partial) nudity was, however, a part of the comic body, see Foley 2000.

43 On the complex psychology and meta-theatricality of Euripides' *Electra*, see Goff 1999–2000.

44 Rags play an important role in the history of deception from our earliest literary evidence, particularly in the disguises of Odysseus, see Murnaghan 1987.

45 For a fuller discussion of the significance of rags in Greek drama, see Telò 2017.

people on stage. Within the fractal-like competition of the Athenian dramatic festival, in which theatre-makers vied with each other in ways conceptually parallel to the struggles of the heroic characters of myth, ragged costumes materially mediated gaps between authors, genres, and ontological levels of mimesis, revealing failure to be an operative and enduring aspect of theatrical production.

3. Rags of Defeat in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*

For its case study in Athenian drama, this chapter takes a scene in which materials mediate between tragedy and comedy, archive and performance, and the on- and offstage life of theatrical costumes and properties. This is a scene set at the home of the tragedian Euripides as depicted in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, the oldest comedy to survive, first produced in Athens 425 BCE. *Acharnians* dramatises the adventures of an Athenian everyman, Dicaeopolis, as he seeks to bring an end to a war that is affecting his livelihood and joy. Frustrated by Athens' dysfunctional Assembly and violently accosted by a hostile chorus of men from the Athenian suburb of Acharnai, Dicaeopolis is compelled, on pain of death, to deliver a persuasive speech advocating peace. In preparing for his big moment, Dicaeopolis declares his intent to dress as wretchedly as possible, presumably to gain his audience's goodwill:

> νῦν οὖν με πρῶτον πρὶν λέγειν ἐάσατε
> ἐνσκευάσασθαί μ' οἷον ἀθλιώτατον.[46]
>
> So now, before I make my speech, please
> let me dress myself up as wretchedly as possible.

Dicaeopolis' plan reveals the general power of materials in Aristophanic comedy to affect an audience. It also suggests how wretched clothes can serve both autological and heterological functions, simultaneously attesting to his real sufferings while deceptively supporting his rhetorical success. At this point in the play, there is little to suggest that Dicaeopolis has theatrical costume specifically in mind. Aristophanes' original audience might have thought, instead, of the common practice in Athenian law-courts of litigants putting on pitiful displays to seek pity from the jury.[47] It therefore may come as a surprise when Dicaeopolis suddenly makes his way to the home of Euripides, where he is greeted by a clever porter who responds to Dicaeopolis' question, 'Is Euripides within?' with a paradox typical of the playwright:

46 Aristoph. Ach. 384–385. Here and elsewhere, for Aristophanes' text I follow the Greek text of Wilson.

47 On the visual theatricality of such law-court spectacles, see O'Connell 2017.

ΔΙΚΑΙΟΠΟΛΙΣ ἔνδον ἔστ᾽ Εὐριπίδης;
ΘΕΡΑΠΩΝ οὐκ ἔνδον ἔνδον ἐστίν, εἰ γνώμην ἔχεις.
ΔΙΚ. πῶς ἔνδον, εἶτ᾽ οὐκ ἔνδον;
ΘΕΡ. ὀρθῶς, ὦ γέρον.
ὁ νοῦς μὲν ἔξω ξυλλέγων ἐπύλλια
οὐκ ἔνδον, αὐτὸς δ᾽ ἔνδον ἀναβάδην ποιεῖ
τραγῳδίαν.
ΔΙΚ. ὦ τρισμακάρι᾽ Εὐριπίδη,
ὅθ᾽ ὁ δοῦλος οὑτωσὶ σοφῶς ὑποκρίνεται.
(V. 395–401)

DICAEOPOLIS: Is Euripides within?
SLAVE: He's within and not within, if you get my point.
DIC: How can it be, that he's within and not within?
SL: It's straightforward, old man.
His mind, being outside collecting versicles, is not within;
but he, himself, is within, composing tragedy with his feet up.
DIC: You are thrice-blessed Euripides,
Since your slave acts so wisely!

Highlighting the intellectual affinity between Euripides and his Porter, the exchange also thematically establishes the disjunction between Euripides' distant and insubstantial words (*epyllia*, 'versicles', V. 398) and the real and present materiality of his body (*autos*, 'he, himself', V. 399). Euripides soon emerges from his home and comes on to the stage, transported on a wheeled platform, the *ekkyklēma*, used in tragedy to portray interior scenes. The scene, evidently, will be paratragic in both its language and physical staging.[48] The particular focus of the scene's satire, Dicaeopolis' first words to Euripides make clear, is the playwright's penchant for indigent and disabled characters dressed in rags.

ΔΙΚ. Εὐριπίδη.
ΕΥΡ. τί λέλακας;
ΔΙΚ. ἀναβάδην ποιεῖς,
ἐξὸν καταβάδην; οὐκ ἐτὸς χωλοὺς ποιεῖς.
ἀτὰρ τί τὰ ῥάκι᾽ ἐκ τραγῳδίας ἔχεις,
ἐσθῆτ᾽ ἐλεινήν; οὐκ ἐτὸς πτωχοὺς ποιεῖς.
ἀλλ᾽ ἀντιβολῶ πρὸς τῶν γονάτων ὦ, Εὐριπίδη,
δός μοι ῥάκιόν τι τοῦ παλαιοῦ δράματος.
(V. 410–415)

48 On 'paratragedy' and its joint use of verbal and material aspects of theatre, see Rau 1967.

DIC. Euripides?
EUR. Why have you spoken?
DIC: Do you compose with your feet up, 410
when it's possible for them to be down? No wonder you create cripples.
But why do you wear those rags from tragedy,
A pitiable costume? No wonder you create beggars!
But I beg you by your knees, Euripides,
give me a bit of rag from the old play...

Dicaeopolis intuits the meaning of Euripides' composition straightaway: 'no wonder (*ouk etos*) you create cripples / beggars.' Dicaeopolis' words represent what at first seems a boorish attempt at literary critique. The Porter has, after all, just marked with sophistication the separation between the poet's abstract and rarefied verbal composition with his personal position. For all its roughness, however, Dicaeopolis' insight offers an alternative explanation of theatrical composition grounded in physical realities and material agency. Dicaeopolis has come in search of a garment that will assist his own speech-making: we are now led to believe he seeks a piteous garment, not simply as a costume for performance, but for poetic inspiration as well.

The strategic vagueness of Dicaeopolis request, 'give me a bit of rag from the old play', triggers the guessing game that lies at the satirical heart of the scene. His request begins a seemingly endless parade of ragged Euripidean heroes, each referenced by means of their ragged costume.

ΕΥΡ. τὰ ποῖα τρύχη; μῶν ἐν οἷς Οἰνεὺς ὁδὶ
ὁ δύσποτμος γεραιὸς ἠγωνίζετο;
ΔΙΚ. οὐκ Οἰνέως ἦν, ἀλλ᾽ ἔτ᾽ ἀθλιωτέρου. 420
ΕΥΡ.τὰ τοῦ τυφλοῦ Φοίνικος;
ΔΙΚ. οὐ Φοίνικος, οὔ·
ἀλλ᾽ ἕτερος ἦν Φοίνικος ἀθλιώτερος.
ΕΥΡ. ποίας ποθ᾽ ἁνὴρ λακίδας αἰτεῖται πέπλων;
ἀλλ᾽ ἦ Φιλοκτήτου τὰ τοῦ πτωχοῦ λέγεις;
ΔΙΚ. οὔκ, ἀλλὰ τούτου πολὺ πολὺ πτωχιστέρου. 425
ΕΥΡ. ἀλλ᾽ ἦ τὰ δυσπινῆ θέλεις πεπλώματα,
ἃ Βελλεροφόντης εἶχ᾽ ὁ χωλὸς οὑτοσί;
ΔΙΚ. οὐ Βελλεροφόντης· ἀλλὰ κἀκεῖνος μὲν ἦν
χωλός, προσαιτῶν, στωμύλος, δεινὸς λέγειν.
ΕΥΡ. οἶδ᾽ ἄνδρα, Μυσὸν Τήλεφον. 430
(V. 418–430)

EUR. Which set of rags? Not the ones in which this Oeneus,
the unlucky old man, did compete?
DIC: No, not Oeneus's, but those of someone even more wretched. 420
EUR: From the blind man, Phoenix?
DIC: Not Phoenix, no;

someone else more wretched than Phoenix.
EUR: Whatever tatters of robes does the man seek?
Do you mean those of Philoctetes, the beggar?
DIC: No – but someone much, much more beggarly than he.
EUR: Then do you want the foul robes
that Bellerophon, this cripple, had?
DIC: Not Bellerophon, though the man I want was
also a cripple, a beggar, a smooth-talker, a capable orator.
EUR: I know the man: Telephus of Mysia!

One might imagine formless rags to be fungible costumes, but those associated with Telephus evidently have some distinctive quality about them. Each character's rags come with particular mythological associations and performance history, even as their respective heroes are compared to one another along such linear scales as 'more wretched' or 'more beggarly'. All of these tragic figures, however, seem to have had something in common beside their costume: as far as we moderns are aware, not one of these tragic heroes appeared in a Euripidean tetralogy that placed first at the City Dionysia competition. Although the causal mechanisms are left implicit, the scene suggests that Telephus' superlative wretchedness, along with his rhetorical skill, are transferred through the medium of these costumes. Demonstrative pronouns, several strengthened by deictic iotas, guarantee that these items are presented and manipulated on stage and when Dicaeopolis at last puts on Telephus' rags, he feels himself 'already filling up with phraselets' (*ēdē rhēmatiōn empimplamai*, V. 447).

Despite the important dramatic role these rags play as materials, most scholars have approached the series of references with literary, mythological, formal concerns in mind. Indeed, in two brief notes, Colin Macleod went so far as to claim that the 'rags' Euripides proffers Dicaeopolis are not truly rags at all, but rather papyrus scrolls, pulled from the playwright's personal library.[49] Such a staging could make for good theatre, but the logocentrism of this proposal should give us pause. Macleod objects to the non-verbal materiality of Euripidean costumes: "Why do the rags [...] fill him [Dicaeopolis] with words [...], instead of being treated simply as props [...]?"[50] If we follow Bennett in attending to the vibrant, agentive capacity of these discarded items, we come closer to seeing Euripides' rags not as Macleod, but rather as Dicaeopolis does – that is to say, as material determinants of the tragedian's poetic production, part of broader causal and competitive networks of poetic composition and stagecraft.

From such a perspective, one begins to observe an implicit pattern in the scene: a vicious cycle in which the rags of Euripides' past characters come to determine his future production. Surrounded by the costumes from his previous competitive failures,

49 See Macleod 1974 and Macleod 1980.
50 Macleod 1974, p. 221.

Euripides' attachment to the materials of his drama has trapped him in an eddying gyre of cliché. That Euripides maintains possession of these costumes long after performance may have been, for Aristophanes' 5th-century Athenian audiences, a matter of significance itself. Although evidence is limited, references in courtroom speeches of Lysias and elsewhere suggest that, following victory in the Dionysia festival, theatre-makers – specifically the *choragoi*, 'producers', but possibly playwrights and actors as well – might religiously dedicate their theatrical equipment (*skeuē*), removing it not only from their own collections but also from material circulation within the city.[51] Victory, then, had the power to sanctify and sublimate matter used in competition. For theatrical gear, continued circulation, whether in home archives or in re-performance, might have come to signal and commemorate past competitive defeat.

Connections between artists and the costumes used in their performances have parallels beyond the Athenian theatre as well. Arion, the dithyrambic singer who memorably appears early in Book 1 of Herodotus' *Histories*, is practically fused with performance gear, worn for what is ostensibly his final performance while he is at the zenith of his professional career.[52] A more obscure but no less significant example is that of the tragedian Sthenelus, mocked late in Aristophanes' *Wasps*, who (an ancient commentator on this passage informs us) had to sell his theatrical costumes when falling upon hard times professionally.[53] The reasons for Sthenelus' sale are left indeterminate. Perhaps, having run out of work he had also run out of money, and the sale was one of financial necessity. But it may be his theatrical gear, itself, had become unwanted: either because it had contributed to his failure in competition or was deemed marked, personally or publicly, by these losses. In the world of the Athenian tragic theatre, no less than in the mythological scenes tragedy portrayed, the successful use and control of one's clothing was a mark of victory. From Euripides to Arion to Sthenelus, we see costumes worn in competition not only as a material extension of the artistic self, but also a sartorial barometer of creative success and failure. Arion keeps his costume on, despite all odds, and miraculously lives to see his would-be murders punished; Sthenelus, mocked for being 'shorn' (*diakekarmenos,* Aristoph. Vesp. 1312) of his gear – an expression that suggests

51 On choragic dedications, see Wilson 2000, p. 238–240, and Kapellos 2014, pp. 66–74; for athletic comparisons, see Straten 1981, p. 91.

52 Hdt. 1,23–24, where Arion is competitively framed as 'second to none', οὐδενὸς δεύτερον [*oudenos deuteron*], of his contemporaries. On the importance of costume in this scene, see Munson 1986, p. 99; on citharodic costume in general see Power 2010, pp. 11–27.

53 See Aristoph. Vesp. 1311–1313, with scholion *ad* 1312, which reports that Sthenelus was 'doing poorly in his art' (κακῶς πράττων' ἐν τῇ τέχνῃ [*kakōs prattōn en tē technē*]). No criteria for Sthenelus' artistic failure are given, but it may be that this corresponded to a lack of success in dramatic competition (indeed, this evidence may simply be conjectural). On the mockery of tragedians in Old Comedy, see Kaimio / Nykopp 1997 and Sommerstein 1996. Olson and Biles (see Aristoph. Vesp., note *ad loc.*) discuss the potential meaning of the commentary.

the passive emasculation of the theatre-maker – abandons hope in his career. Euripides, however, clings to his costumes, but evidently only those which failed to win in competition and could not be religiously dedicated. This scene in *Acharnians* has traditionally been read as criticism of Euripides as a verbal poet, overly dependent upon a narrative trope that has resulted in a glut of ragged costumes. But it may be approached from a different angle, informed by a sense of materials' latent 'vibrancy', particularly in their aggregate collection. Trapped within an archive of costumes that he cannot or will not sell, Euripides is doomed to further cycles of defeat. By taking Telephus' rags and other assorted paraphernalia away from the tragedian, Dicaeopolis may not rob Euripides of his tragedy so much as free the playwright to follow a fresh, more competitively successful, path.

4. Conclusion

The connections between negative affect and negative aesthetics are gaining further attention. Scholars today rarely approach the study of beauty and ugliness in terms of a dispassionate Kantian contemplation of form, but as composite, embodied experiences awash in feelings and memory, both individual and collective. This recent sea change in aesthetics is not a turn from the objective to the subjective – Kant, after all, was obsessively concerned with the subject – but rather a shift from the ideal to the material, to the contextual and the connected. The result is a multi-directional aesthetics, based upon layered networks and interrelationships between subjects and objects. Theatre, by its very nature, places subjects and objects, actors and materials, in complexly layered and ontologically ambiguous connections. The drive to materialise failure was central to the dramatic programs of 5th-century Athenian playwrights, from Aeschylus to Aristophanes, who turned to theatre's multi-media presentation to capture and communicate the negative emotions of defeat for purposes both tragic and comedic. In this context, we might not be surprised if rags, the affective material of defeat *par excellence*, reappeared time and time again.

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