



Literary Prizes and Literary Criticism in Antiquity

This article explores the role of Athenian literary prizes in the development of ancient literary criticism. It examines the views of a range of critics (including Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, historians, biographers, lexicographers, commentators, and the self-critical poets of Old Comedy), and identifies several recurrent themes. The discussion reveals that ideas about what was good or bad in literature were not directly affected by the award of prizes; in fact the ancient critics display what is called an “anti-prize” mentality. The article argues that this “anti-prize” mentality is not, as is often thought, a product of intellectual developments in the fourth century BC. It is suggested that the devaluation of prizes is actually a contemporary, integral feature of prize-awarding culture in general. This article draws on recent approaches from cultural sociology to offer some conclusions about the way in which prizes function in popular and critical discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

From the earliest times, literature was shaped by rivalry and competition. The question of a poet’s identity, individuality, or excellence was often framed, implicitly or explicitly, with reference to his predecessors or rivals in the field.¹ Much archaic and early classical Greek poetry is strongly characterized by what

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1. Early lyric and epic poets often staked their claims to truth, originality, authenticity (etc.) in competition with other poets: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 2.594–600; Hes. *Theog.* 26–28, 526–34, 613–16; Hom. *H. Apoll.* 19–29, 140–78; Stesichorus fr. 192 *PMGF*; Alcman fr. 1 *PMG*; Pind. *Ol.* 1.46–55; 10.1–6; *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, etc. On this aspect of early Greek poetry see Bowie 1993, Burkert 1987, Graziosi 2002, Griffith 1990.

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has been called a “competitive and contradictory stance,”² and in general the “competitive spirit” of the Greeks is so familiar as to be almost a commonplace. But in classical Athens this tendency developed a new significance in the context of highly elaborate, state-organized dramatic festivals, which involved the formal ranking of competitors and the institutional award of prizes for the “best” work. This article investigates what sort of value or prestige was conferred, or implied, by the award of such a prize, and explores the role of the literary prize in the development of ancient literary criticism.

How were ideas about what was “good” or “bad” in literature shaped by prizes? The answer is, perhaps surprisingly, almost not at all—except in an indirect or negative sense. Contemporary society at large clearly took literary competitions and their outcomes very seriously indeed, but there is virtually *no* correlation between the opinions of festival judges and those of the critics. Many critics do not mention the competitions at all (as if the plays were never performed but just read in the library). Of those who do mention them, nearly all express disapproval or dissent of some sort. One might refer to this type of attitude, broadly, as an “anti-prize” mentality, though (as we shall see) the label covers quite a range of positions. It also needs careful qualification: that is, the critics examined do not seem to be opposed to prizes *tout court*, or to the hierarchical ranking of literature in principle. Rather, they take issue with the manner in which the competitions are organized or adjudicated in general, or with individual awards made on specific occasions. There is no documented instance of a “well-deserved” first prize: any results which attract critical comment at all are said to be unjust. Disputes over prizes are not, of course, confined to literary competitions; but in no other type of *agon* do we find the same overwhelming sense of dissent from the judges’ decisions. (In sporting, political, or judicial *agones* there is naturally never quite the same degree of inherent ambiguity over who is the “best” competitor, but there is more to it than that.)

It is sometimes argued that the “anti-prize” mentality is specifically a product of the emergence, in the fourth century and later, of “literary criticism” as a distinct, quasi-professional branch of scholarship. Andrew Ford’s excellent book *The Origins of Criticism* is one recent example of such an approach. As Ford sees it, the values of archaic and early classical writers who express “critical” views were broadly the same as the values of society at large, whereas later “professional” critics were concerned to distance themselves from society.³ There is much to be said for this explanation. Certainly writers such as Plato, Aristotle, and others (as we shall see) are notable for their “anti-prize” opinions, and

2. Griffith 1990: 187; cf. 191 (“Poems were usually designed to defeat other poems”).

3. Ford 2002, esp. 273: “Only with the generations of Plato and Aristotle was the case made that poets should be judged on the basis of criteria specific to their art.” Cf. Revermann 2006b: 13–15. On “literary criticism” as a distinct discipline, cf. Kennedy 1989 and Russell 1981.

these opinions clearly relate to their conception of the nature of literature and its function in society. But Ford's model does not fully account for the "anti-prize" views found in earlier sources, nor does he fully explore literary prizes as a *distinct* phenomenon or specific subject of interest within the broader field of literary-critical culture.

I suggest that in fact the devaluing of prizes is not a comparatively late *development* but a contemporary, integral part of prize-awarding culture itself. At any rate, the evidence which I will examine shows that the "anti-prize" mentality is not specifically a product of fourth-century and later literary criticism, but that in some form it is already manifest during the fifth century in Athens, the heyday of competitive theatre performance. Indeed, the opinions of critics "proper," though they may have their own distinct preoccupations and approaches, do not strike me as being very different in essence from the views of other writers not normally labeled "critics." If we want to understand all these ancient views on prizes, rather than focusing on the alleged conflict between critical discourse and popular discourse, we can focus instead on the way in which cultural prizes operate within society in general.

This observation prompts an explanation of the types of "critical" writing which are relevant to our discussion. The evidence examined here is a patchwork of rather heterogeneous material, including the works of Plato and Aristotle, comedians, historians, biographers, lexicographers, commentators, and others—not to mention the epigraphic record—from a fairly wide historical period. It makes sense to discuss all this material together, although some of it does not traditionally fall under the heading of "literary criticism" in the strict sense, because collectively it adds up to a coherent tradition of critical reception. All the writers studied here are, in various ways, criticizing or commenting on literature, and (despite what is sometimes assumed) they are all evidently informed by a broadly similar set of assumptions and influences.

One of the most important categories of critical literature for our purposes is not the prose treatises of "professional" critics but the dramatic works themselves: the unusually *self-critical* works of "old" comedy. Comedy is a unique source because it is contemporary with the competitive culture which it describes; it simultaneously participates in *and* criticizes the competition; it is highly self-conscious, standing both inside and outside the system; it can be seen as performing some of the functions of popular discourse and "the media" in general, since it plays to (and must in some sense represent) the views of its audience. More importantly still, the fifth-century comedians embody both the "pro-prize" and the "anti-prize" mentality. They confirm the value of prizes by taking part in the competition, but they simultaneously devalue prizes by their negative criticism of the judges and audience, of specific awards, or even of the prize-awarding system as a whole. This seemingly paradoxical perspective has a crucial bearing on our study of prize-culture, but it also brings with it important consequences for one's

understanding of the comedians' place within the literary-critical tradition more generally.⁴

Much of the material surveyed here is far removed in space and time from classical Athens; indeed, some of the sources are not even talking primarily (or at all) about Athenian festivals and prizes. One of the reasons for this eclecticism is, simply, the lack of evidence: there is so little information specifically relating to ancient prizes that we have to use all that we can get hold of. Nevertheless, what might have turned out to be a rag-bag of views can in fact be seen as a surprisingly coherent critical tradition. This overall consistency seems all the more remarkable when one takes into account the variety of different contexts in which these writers engaged in the production, consumption, and evaluation of literature. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that systems for bestowing cultural prizes operated differently across contexts and genres. Nevertheless, the broad homogeneity of critical views suggests to me that it might be useful to apply a diachronic rather than a synchronic approach. In other words, I suggest, we can study literary prizes, and account for these views, not as historical phenomena within one specific context, but as cross-cultural phenomena.

What follows is in four parts. Part II discusses the place of literary prizes within society more generally, using approaches derived from modern cultural sociology. Parts III and IV provide an analysis of the ancient critical material relating to literary prizes and identify a number of significant trends. Part V offers some conclusions and suggests ways in which this work could be taken further.

II. ANCIENT AND MODERN CULTURAL PRIZES

All forms of recognition—prizes, rewards and honours, election to an academy, a university, a scientific committee, invitation to a congress or to a university, publication in a scientific review or by a consecrated publishing house, in anthologies, mentions in the work of contemporaries, works on art history or the history of science, in encyclopaedias and dictionaries, etc.—are just so many forms of co-optation, whose value depends on the very position of the co-optants in the hierarchy of consecration.⁵

The view that the literary prize is a distinct and peculiarly transhistorical phenomenon finds support not only in the uniformity of critical views throughout antiquity but also in the remarkable similarity between prizes in the ancient and

4. Situating comedy within the development of Greek literary criticism in general is a difficult and controversial business: see (e.g.) Pohlenz 1920; Denniston 1927; O'Sullivan 1992; Dover 1993: 24–37; Silk 2000; Ford 2002 for widely differing views. This subject, which is too large to discuss fully here, demands book-length treatment (see Wright forthcoming).

5. Bourdieu 1993: 13 n. 18.

the modern world. In this respect, some useful insight may be gained from recent theoretical approaches to literature and art.

The work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is of particular importance to our investigation. Bourdieu's distinctive contribution to the sociology of culture—in works such as *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, and *The Rules of Art*—was to provide a far-reaching analysis of the social and economic conditions which underlie literary and artistic taste. Judgments of “taste,” however much they may seem to be based on purely aesthetic criteria, are revealed by Bourdieu as being complex expressions of social status.⁶ All forms of critical judgment, along with the works of literature and art themselves, are seen as “cultural capital” and can therefore be discussed in economic terms, alongside other forms of capital (money, class, political power and so on).⁷ It follows from this that cultural capital may be used as a means of negotiating other types of power relationship within society—notably by perpetuating class distinctions, but in various other ways as well. To exercise critical judgment on literature, in other words, is an assertion of power and status (in a sense which may not be immediately apparent from the way in which the judgment is expressed).⁸

Bourdieu was particularly interested in what he called “autonomization”—the process by which art, literature, and other cultural products come to be treated by their producers or consumers as separable from other forms of “capital.” He traces the emergence of two distinct views of art in “the market of symbolic goods”: a tension between “art-as-commodity” on one hand and supposedly “pure” or esoteric art on the other hand. Basically this is a clash of high-brow versus low-brow values, expressed in economic terms. The whole “field of cultural production” is seen as being internally divided between the sub-field of *extended* or large-scale production (which caters for the masses, with their relatively conventional tastes) and the sub-field of *restricted* or small-scale production (which caters for the élite and intellectuals—a self-perpetuating and self-legitimizing group).⁹ As Bourdieu puts it, “the autonomy of a field of restricted production can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products.” These “autonomous” criteria usually turn out to privilege form over content or function—a gesture which might be seen as affirming the unique and irreplaceable skill of the individual artist, but which is really a more or less transparent attempt by the field of

6. See especially Bourdieu 1984: 6 (“Taste classifies; and it classifies the classifier”).

7. Bourdieu 1977. The task of the cultural sociologist is thus “to extend economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without differentiation, which present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after” (178). Cf. Bowler 1994 on more recent developments in “the sociology of art.”

8. Cf. Too 1998, who sees “the idea of ancient literary criticism” (*tout court*) in terms of power play.

9. Bourdieu 1993: 1–34; cf. Bourdieu 1996: 113–40.

restricted production to bracket itself off from other pre-existing forms of power relationships.¹⁰

This dichotomy between two opposing views of culture, which may seem very familiar from today's perspective, is explained by Bourdieu as having arisen at a specific moment in comparatively recent history: the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic reaction in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. He explicitly contrasts the modern cultural field with the artistic culture of pre-modern (or "primitive") societies, which he sees as "*unified* within an immediately accessible spectacle involving music, dance, theatre and song."¹¹ Though there is no indication that Bourdieu intended any allusion to the classical world, this description of "primitive" culture could almost be a quotation from any number of recent books on Greek drama. Nevertheless, I think Bourdieu is mistaken to imply that the "autonomization" of literature and art and the clash of high and low value systems represents a purely modern phenomenon. In fact, as we shall see, very nearly all of what he says about modern artistic culture can be applied, *mutandis mutatis*, to the classical Greek world. In particular, the opposition between mass and high-cultural value systems seems to underlie the "anti-prize" mentality of the ancient critical tradition.

Literary and cultural prizes fit rather uneasily into Bourdieu's view of the field of cultural production. This is partly because they are difficult to locate precisely within the economic model of "cultural capital" (are prizes themselves a form of capital, or is their function more like that of gifts, whose value is more difficult to quantify?). But it is due more to the fact that the status of those who bestow the prizes—the "consecrators," to use Bourdieu's term—has to be evaluated, or contested, in relation to the status of the "consecrated" prize winners. The ambivalent status of such prizes within today's society has recently been explored by James English, whose stimulating book *The Economy of Prestige* is an extensive, Bourdieu-influenced study of cultural prizes (such as the Oscars, the Baftas, and the Booker Prize).¹² Like Bourdieu, English believes that the clash of cultural value systems is specifically a feature of the modern world. Although he mentions Athenian dramatic contests as "precursors" to modern prizes, he does not discuss them at length, since he treats the cultural prize as a distinctly modern entity.¹³

Once again, however, almost all of what English has to say about modern prizes seems to apply equally well to the ancient world. His description of the characteristic features of modern prize culture will seem very familiar to the ancient historian: the inseparable (but endlessly contested) relationship between

10. Bourdieu 1993: 5–8, 34.

11. *Ibid.*, 11.

12. English 2005.

13. *Ibid.*, 2005: 1–28; he dates the "modern" period from the introduction of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1901.

cultural value and other types of value; the institutional or state “ownership” of prizes; the contrast between the lavish funding of the system and the puny monetary value of the prizes; the proliferation of material to be judged; the trend towards “memorialization” of the winners; the large amount of “hype” generated among the public; the fact that the occasion and adjudication is a form of entertainment in its own right; the selectively ambivalent attitude which both winners and losers show towards prizes; and the frequency with which “scandals” and “wrong” decisions are identified. In fact, the only substantial differences between ancient and modern prizes seem to consist in the number of prizes on offer and in the nature of the judges.

Most importantly of all for our purposes, English demonstrates that modern prizes operate, in popular and critical discourse alike, precisely by generating a mixture of “hype” and “anti-hype,” which together form an integrated, unitary system of discourse. Given the nature of cultural prizes and their uneasy relationship to other forms of “capital,” it is seemingly inevitable in a prize-awarding culture that there should be a permanent tension between “pro-” and “anti-prize” mentalities. The whole system is characterized by an ongoing—and permanently irresolvable—debate about how one should properly evaluate literature and the arts. And this debate is not purely a literary matter—for there can be no such thing as a *purely* literary matter—but it should be seen, rather, as an expression of another ongoing, and much more complex, debate about the structure and operation of society at large.

Cultural-sociological approaches of this sort provide a plausible and attractive model for interpreting our ancient material. Ultimately, of course, it is impossible to *prove* that comparisons between the ancient and modern world are valid. To apply Bourdieu’s methods fully to the ancient world would require access to detailed information about Greek society that we simply do not have. But, at the very least, Bourdieu, English, and others suggest a highly distinctive line of approach (and one which seems to fit the evidence better than alternative approaches).

Whether or not the reader is convinced by the claim that literary prizes are a cross-cultural phenomenon (a view that will emerge more clearly from the analyses offered in Parts III and IV below), the discussion so far suggests that ancient critical discourse relating to prizes may not correspond in every particular to ancient critical discourse on other aspects of literature. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that the dramatic competitions in fifth-century Athens were just another species of ancient competition, corresponding in every respect to the Greek competitive spirit (as we know it) in general. In the first place, Bourdieu’s analysis of the “field of cultural production” suggests that *cultural* prizes are bound to be different from other sorts of prize. In addition, the fifth century in particular marked a time of crucial change at Athens.

It is true enough that the Dionysia, Lenaea, and other Attic festivals from the fifth century onwards developed out of a pre-existing agonistic culture: the

idea of literary and musical competitions was nothing new in itself. Nor was there anything new about the presence of dissent or ambivalence in the conduct or outcome of such competitions. It can scarcely be said that earlier literary contests were straightforward affairs, a form of “zero-sum game” (like a football match or an athletic contest) in which there were always clear-cut winners and losers.¹⁴ But there *were* several important new things about the prize-culture of fifth-century Athens: namely, the acquisition and administration of prizes by the newly democratic city-state; the politicization of established ritual practices; the huge scale of the fully developed festival calendar; the elaborate rigmarole of the competition and its adjudication—all of these features mark out the Athenian dramatic competitions as radically different from their predecessors.¹⁵ What we are seeing, in effect, is a new and distinct type of prize—the *institutionalized* literary prize—emerging against a background of enormous social, political, and intellectual change more generally.

But enough of methodology. Having set the scene for our interpretation, let us now turn to the ancient evidence itself, contrasting the “pro-prize” mentality of society at large with the “anti-prize” mentality that pervades and characterizes the literary-critical tradition.

III. CONSECRATION: THE “PRO-PRIZE” MENTALITY

Cratinus, son of Callimedes, Athenian, comic poet: his style was brilliant, but he was given to drinking and ruined by his love of boys. He belonged to the “old” comedy. He wrote twenty-one plays and won nine victories.¹⁶

The results of dramatic competitions were taken very seriously in antiquity, not just in the run-up to the festivals and their immediate aftermath but for many years afterwards. The high level of state control and management of the festivals, together with their lavish funding, can be seen as a powerful sign of public validation.¹⁷ Being a *choregos* carried huge political prestige and attracted fierce ambition.¹⁸ The winners (and runners-up) were publicly commemorated and their

14. See Griffith 1990 (esp. 191: “‘Winning’ may not prove anything. . . it may be more profitable, or more appropriate to ‘lose.’ It all depends who is judging, and who your opponent is, and the real test may be as much of the judge as of the contestants”). Cf. Graziosi 2002 and Rosen 2004 on the “winner” of the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* (and attendant problems).

15. See Pickard-Cambridge 1988 for detailed discussion of all such matters (and cf. Part IV(a) below).

16. *Suda* s.v. “Cratinus” (x 2344). The selection and arrangement of information (including, prominently, the number of prizes won) is typical of *Suda* entries for dramatists: one could add many more examples.

17. On all such matters see Csapo and Slater 1994 and Pickard-Cambridge 1988.

18. See (e.g.) Plut. *Nic.* 3; [Andoc.] *in Alcib.* 20–21; Dem. *in Meid.* 14–18, 58–61. The *choregia* is exhaustively discussed by Wilson 2000.

achievements recorded for posterity in victory lists, public records, and personal monuments: the scale of personal commemorative statues of successful *choregoi* in the fourth century and later is often overwhelming.¹⁹ The results of fifth-century Athenian competitions were still being commemorated in public inscriptions many hundreds of years later, not just in Athens itself but much further afield.²⁰

There is some evidence to suggest that the poets themselves cared about winning prizes: the comedians, in particular, frequently referred to victory, failure, and rivalry (though such references cannot always be taken at face value),²¹ and Aeschylus even left Athens—allegedly—because of his anger over failing to win a prize.²² Prize winners would hold elaborate celebrations (Agathon's party in 416 BC was famously described by Plato in his *Symposium*), and it seems that they won immediate fame and celebrity. We also read (possibly exaggerated or ironical) stories of successful poets becoming swollen-headed and using their victory as a means of social—or erotic—advancement.²³ It might be thought that the competitive spirit spurred on poets to write better work: Plutarch, for example, writing about the 468 Dionysia in particular, records that the unusual distinction of the judging panel (including Cimon) raised the contest to a more fiercely ambitious level,²⁴ while Longinus, writing more generally about the creative process, says that great thoughts are connected to enthusiasm for rivalry and writers' prize-winning ambitions.²⁵

The “knock-on” effects of prize winning are evident in many texts. Aristotle, though (as we shall see) he deplored dramatic competitions and their effects, nevertheless wrote a work called *Didaskaliai* (“Performance Records”) and another called *Victories at the Dionysia*—serious literary losses indeed. Subsequent

19. See Wilson 2000: 198–262. Literary references include Ar. *Pol.* 1341a34–36; Plut. *Them.* 5; Theophr. *Ch.* 22.1–2.

20. E.g. the Athenian *Fasti* and *Didaskaliai* (IG ii2.2319–23), IG ii2.3091, and the Roman *Fasti* (IGUR 215–31). For recent discussion see Csapo and Slater 1994: 39–52; de Bernardi Ferraro 1966; Wilson 2000: 236–62.

21. E.g. Ar. *Clouds* 510ff., *Wasps* 1000ff. Numerous additional passages are cited by Ruffell 2002, Sidwell 1995, and Storey 2003.

22. *Vit. Aeschyl.* 8–11: he was defeated either by Sophocles (in the tragic competition) or by Simonides (in the competition to write a funerary epigram for those who died at Marathon). The details of the anecdote are no doubt inaccurate, but the point of the anecdote is that Aeschylus took his own prize winning seriously; cf. Lefkowitz 1981. By way of comparison, Sophocles' biographer records that a victory had fatal consequences: his delight at unexpectedly winning the Dionysia caused him to choke to death (*Vit. Soph.* 14).

23. Ar. *Knights* 529–30, *Peace* 762–63, *Wasps* 1023–28; Eupolis *Autolykus* fr. 65 PCG. Henderson 1990: 291–97 discusses prize-winning “celebrity.” Storey 2003: 288–90 points out that these references could be stock “running gags.” Quite so: but for the jokes to work it has to be plausible that a poet might let victory go to his head and behave differently as a result. We do not have to take the anecdotes literally to appreciate the attitudes which underpin them.

24. Plut. *Cim.* 8.9. The fact that this incident also increased Cimon's own prestige is another indication of the high status that contemporary Athenians accorded to the competition.

25. Long. *de Subl.* 44.1–4. In fact Longinus' views on prize winning are more ambivalent than this passage alone would suggest: see Part IV(c) below.

generations of scholars, librarians, and others were preoccupied with recording the details of prizes won or lost. If one reads an ancient biography, an entry in the *Suda*, or a *Hypothesis* to a tragedy or comedy in manuscript, one almost invariably encounters a reference to the number of prizes won by the author in question. This information was, clearly, thought to be one of the most important facts to be preserved for posterity—thus permanently characterizing the author as a success or failure (one might compare a modern *Who's Who* entry or obituary for the same sort of preoccupation). Nowadays one is always being reminded that the prizes went to performances, not texts; yet the readers of *books* in Alexandrian and Byzantine libraries still, many years after the original performances, wanted to know how many prizes had been won by the authors whom they studied.

The ancient *Life* of Sophocles records that the playwright won twenty victories, and often won second prize, but (significantly) never came third.²⁶ In other words, Sophocles (as far as we can tell) won more first prizes than any other tragedian, and this prize-winning record seems to have had a direct effect on his lasting reputation as a playwright. This is indicated by the epitaph on his tomb, which is said to have read: κρύπτω τῷδε τάφῳ Σοφοκλῆ πρωτεῖα λαβόντα τῆι τραγικῆι τέχνῃ, σχῆμα τὸ σεμνότατον (“Here lies Sophocles, who won first prize with his tragic art, whose character was most holy”).²⁷ Whether or not this detail is strictly accurate,²⁸ it is extremely significant, because it suggests that Sophocles was seen by posterity as a “winner,” not just in the case of specific contests but in general: he won first prize *with his tragic art* (as a whole).²⁹ So, in the rhetoric of the “pro-prize” mentality, literary prizes could become a *metaphor* for excellence in literature.

A number of passages from Longinus’ essay *On The Sublime* bring out more clearly this metaphorical sense of prize winning. Longinus repeatedly connects the idea of literary excellence with the image of prizes: significantly, he is not talking just about drama but about literature as a whole. For example:

καὶ ἔτι νῆ Δία πότερον ποτε αἰ πλείους ἀρεταὶ τὸ πρωτεῖον ἐν λόγοις
ἢ αἰ μείζους δικαίως ἂν φέροιντο. . . .

33.1

26. *Vita Soph.* 8 (= *TrGF* iv, Test. A1). This information, we are told, comes from Carystius of Pergamon, an otherwise obscure scholar of the second century BC who, like Aristotle, wrote a work on performance records (Περὶ διδασκαλιῶν: *FGrHist* 4.359; cf. Athenaeus 6.235). The *Suda* s.v. “Sophocles” (ς 815) gives the number of his victories as twenty-three.

27. *Vita Soph.* 16 (= *TrGF* iv, Test. A1). The biographer adds a remark of Ister [*FGrHist* 334 F 38] about Sophocles’ excellence (in general).

28. Lefkowitz 1981: 86 “The biographer appends an epigram provided by the literary forger Lobon.” Lefkowitz in general stresses the inaccurate and derivative nature of much ancient biographical data.

29. Cf. a Hellenistic epigram, quoted by Athenaeus (13.603f-604f), which relies for its joke on Sophocles’ being seen as recurrently a “winner,” not just in dramatic contests but in other situations. Discussed by Tyrrell 2005.

And, indeed [we must enquire] whether it is the greater number of good qualities or the greater good qualities that properly deserve to win the prize. . . .

οἶμαι τὰς μείζονας ἀρέτας, εἰ καὶ μὴ ἐν πᾶσι διομαλίζουσιν, τὴν τοῦ πρωτείου ψῆφον μᾶλλον ἀεὶ φέρεσθαι. . . .

33.4

I believe that the greater good qualities, even if they are not consistent throughout, should always win the vote for first prize. . . .³⁰

As I said earlier, it is unusual for a professional literary critic to talk about prizes with what appears (on the face of it) to be approbation; and in fact Longinus is the only ancient critic in whose work we find this sort of attitude. However, his position on prizes is more complex than this might suggest: despite the passages cited, he does not straightforwardly exhibit a celebratory, “pro-prize” outlook. (See IV(c) below.)

It is clear that a writer’s prize-winning success on a specific occasion was repeatedly celebrated, recorded, monumentalized (literally or metaphorically), and thus perpetuated *ad infinitum*. The results of the competitions *mattered*: they became associated with a certain enduring—not merely ephemeral—value. But was this “value” genuine? Perhaps not.

IV. DEVALUATION: THE “ANTI-PRIZE” MENTALITY

The very large number of victories won by Aeschylus and Sophocles is a testimony to the general fairness of the verdicts and the capacity of the judges on the fifth century BC; each of these poets was victorious with more than half of his plays. Euripides won few victories, partly because his views and probably his technique were less popular during his lifetime than they afterwards became, partly because he had Sophocles to compete against. Now and then, of course, things went wrong.³¹

One encounters an almost complete disjunction between the award of prizes and the judgment of literary critics. Let us now explore this “anti-prize” mentality in more depth, by identifying certain recurrent strands in the critical tradition. The ancient critics tend to focus repeatedly on a number of issues: the manner in which the competitions are adjudicated; the role and nature of the audience; the criteria for prize winning; the effect of competition on the authors; the relationship between performances and “literature”; the type of value conferred by a prize; and the nature of genuine literary appreciation.

30. Cf. *ibid.* 35.2 (τί ποτ’ οὖν εἶδον οἱ ἰσόθεοι ἐκεῖνοι καὶ τῶν μεγίστων ἐπορευόμενοι τῆς συγγραφῆς;). Russell (1964: ad loc.) translates the underlined phrase as “the greatest prizes in literature,” though the sense of “prize” is less explicit here (the writers in question could be aiming for “greatness” more generally).

31. Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 98–99.

IV(A): THE DECISIONS ARE MADE BY STUPID AND UNDISCERNING AUDIENCES

The judging process adopted at the Dionysia and other classical Attic festivals, though obscure in some details, was a highly elaborate system, controlled by the state and painstakingly designed to be transparent, accountable and resistant to abuses (such as bribery or vote-rigging). The most remarkable feature of this procedure is its similarity to *political* decision-making processes (a similarity that has often been observed).³² The judges were not literary critics or professional dramatists,³³ but amateurs. These were ordinary Athenian citizens, selected at random, who presided over the competition precisely in their capacity as representatives of the democratic city: there could be no more direct sign of the institutionalized, state-owned nature of the prizes.³⁴ This fact alone might be enough to account for the hostility of professional literary critics; but there are other reasons for seeing the adjudication procedure as unsatisfactory. Despite all the complicated arrangements that were in place, it appears that in practice the ten judges did not have complete control over the outcome. Chance played a role because of the order in which the voting tablets were drawn out of the urn: according to one calculation, it would have been possible to win first prize with only three out of the ten votes!³⁵ Then again, political expediency might determine the winner, no matter how good or bad the plays were.³⁶

The critics (perhaps oddly) do not draw attention to all these problems, but they have plenty to say about the people who made the decisions at the festivals. All the signs indicate that, even though in theory the judges were in charge, in practice it was the theatre audience who chose the winners: they would indicate their views, often noisily, throughout the competition, even if they had no formal vote as such.³⁷ This is shown by, for example, the chorus leader's oath in Aristophanes' *Birds*:

XO. ὄμνυμι' ἐπὶ τούτοις, πᾶσι νικᾶν τοῖς κριταῖς
καὶ τοῖς θεαταῖς πᾶσιν—

32. For all relevant evidence, and excellent recent discussion, see Marshall and van Willigenburg 2004. Cf. Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 96–99.

33. However, it has been argued that a relatively large proportion of Athenian citizens would at some point in their lives have performed in public, and therefore would have possessed a significant degree of theatrical “competence”: see Revermann 2006a and (for a different view) Pritchard 2004.

34. Cf. Henderson 1990.

35. See Marshall and van Willigenburg 2004: 100–102.

36. See (e.g.) Plut. *Cim.* 8.7–9 (the notorious Dionysia of 468, at which Cimon replaced all the judges); Andoc. *in Alcib.* 20 (Alcibiades' chorus won a victory on one occasion because of the judges' fear or wish to ingratiate themselves); Lys. 4.4 (on the political motives of the competitors), etc. On the last of these, Wilson 2000: 101 comments with surprise that “personal relations between élite individuals could be *openly* avowed in court as legitimate grounds for determining one's vote.”

37. Interestingly, this contrasts with the practice in Sicily and Italy, where the spectators *did* formally make the decision, awarding the prize by show of hands (Plato *Laws* 2.659b). One might ask why this was never the case in Athens: perhaps because of the presence of non-Athenians at the Dionysia?

ΠΕ. ἔσται ταυταγί.
 ΧΟ. εἰ δὲ παραβαίην, ἐνὶ κριτῆι νικᾶν μόνον.

Ar. *Birds* 445–47

Chorus-leader: I hereby swear that I will win by all the judges and all the audience members—
 Peisetaerus: You will!
 Chorus-leader: —but if I transgress, may I win by just a single judge’s vote!³⁸

In a number of other passages from comedy, appeals are made to the judges and the audience members alike,³⁹ but it is the audience in particular, not the judges, to whom Aristophanes repeatedly attributes the success or failure of his plays.⁴⁰

This state of affairs was bound to trouble critics writing from a perspective of social, political, or philosophical élitism. For such writers, mass audiences, being naturally inferior, undisciplined, or lacking education and wisdom, were seen as ill-equipped to make important decisions about literary value.⁴¹ It is particularly telling (and frustrating) that the “élitist” critics do not even ask what the audience members *thought* they were doing when they made their decisions: they simply dismiss the judgments of the masses, without inquiring too closely into the criteria on which they were made or the reasons why they took pleasure in “the wrong” type of work. (Nobody, presumably, sat in the theatre thinking: “I am an idiot; this is a self-evidently bad play: I must vote for it.”)

The most prominent opponents of theatre audiences and judges on ideological grounds of this type are Plato and Aristotle. Of course, neither of these two writers can be said to be exactly representative of typical attitudes, but their collective influence on the later critical tradition was considerable. Their views on literature and society are well known and have been exhaustively discussed:⁴² here I am interested just in those passages in which they specifically mention prizes.

Plato’s views on poetry (in general) and its effects on its audiences are laid out most fully in the *Republic*, but in a number of passages from the *Laws* he touches on the adjudication procedure and its failings. At *Laws* 2.657e–658e one finds a (comparatively rare) mention of the criteria used to award prizes. The discussion is more concerned with identifying the best genre of poetry than with the criteria for judging poetry, but essentially the premise (so Plato’s Athenian Stranger argues) is that the poet who best succeeds in giving enjoyment and

38. Aelian *VH* 2.13 presents a similar scenario, with the audience *commanding* the judges to vote in a certain way—though, as Dunbar 1994: 307 rightly points out, the audience’s “command” was ignored on the occasion in question (the first performance of Ar. *Clouds*).

39. Ar. *Birds* 1102–1104, *Clouds* 1115–30, *Eccl.* 1154–62; Pherecrates *Krapataloi* fr. 102 K-A.

40. Ar. *Clouds* 525ff., *Wasps* 1020ff., *Frogs* 805–11 (see below), fr. 688 K-A; cf. Cratinus fr. 329 K-A.

41. Cf., more recently, Römer 1905 on the audience’s low level of taste and discernment.

42. Kennedy 1989 gives a useful bibliography.

pleasure should be considered the most skilful and awarded the prize. However, he concedes, different judges enjoy different things, and so uncertainty is created over who should rightly win. Initially (657e5–6) it is suggested that the prize should go to the poet who gives the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people (which seems like a very un-Platonic, “audience-friendly” viewpoint); but in the end it is the verdict of “the best people” (οἱ βέλτιστοι) that counts, not just that of any old person. Plato’s Athenian goes on to explain why this should be so, in a passage which is worth quoting at length:

συγχωρῶ δὴ τό γε τοσοῦτον καὶ ἐγὼ τοῖς πολλοῖς, δεῖν τὴν μουσικὴν ἡδονῇ κρίνεσθαι, μὴ μέντοι τῶν γε ἐπιτυχόντων, ἀλλὰ σχεδὸν ἐκείνην εἶναι Μοῦσαν καλλίστην ἥτις τοὺς βελτίστους καὶ ἰκανῶς πεπαιδευμένους τέρπει, μάλιστα δὲ ἥτις ἓνα τὸν ἀρετῆι τε καὶ παιδείαι διαφέροντα· διὰ ταῦτα δὲ ἀρετῆς φαμεν δεῖσθαι τοὺς τούτων κριτάς, ὅτι τῆς τε ἄλλης μετόχους αὐτοὺς εἶναι δεῖ φρονήσεως καὶ δὴ καὶ τῆς ἀνδρείας. οὔτε γὰρ παρὰ θεάτρου δεῖ τὸν γε ἀληθῆ κριτὴν κρίνειν μανθάνοντα, καὶ ἐκπληττόμενον ὑπὸ θορύβου τῶν πολλῶν καὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀπαιδευσίας, οὔτ’ αὖ γινώσκοντα δι’ ἀνανδρίαν καὶ δειλίαν ἐκ ταύτου στόματος οὐπερ τοὺς θεοὺς ἐπεκαλέσατο μέλλων κρίνειν, ἐκ τούτου ψευδόμενον ἀποφαίνεσθαι ῥαιθύμως τὴν κρίσιν· οὐ γὰρ μαθητῆς ἀλλὰ διδάσκαλος, ὡς γε τὸ δίκαιον, θεατῶν μᾶλλον ὁ κριτῆς καθίζει, καὶ ἐναντιωσόμενος τοῖς τὴν ἡδονὴν μὴ προσηκόντως μηδὲ ὀρθῶς ἀποδιδούσι θεαταῖς.

2.658e6–659b5

Certainly I agree with the majority view that art should be judged according to pleasure—but not the pleasure of any Tom, Dick or Harry. I think that the most beautiful Muse is the one who gives delight to the best people and those with a proper education, and most of all the one who pleases a single judge, one distinguished in virtue and education. For this reason we say that the judges of these competitions need virtue: they must have a share in all wisdom, and especially courage. The true judge ought not to take instruction from the audience when giving his verdict, and be distracted by the din of the crowd and his own lack of education; nor, when he knows the outcome, ought he to deliver his verdict carelessly through weakness and cowardice, swearing falsely out of the very same mouth with which he invoked the gods when he was preparing to sit in judgment. For, properly speaking, the judge sits not as a pupil, but rather as a teacher of the audience, and he is to oppose those who offer the audience pleasure that is of an unseemly or improper sort.

This discussion is all about how competitions *ought* to be administered, in an ideal world. Thus, by describing the way things *ought not* to be run, Plato’s characters are in effect describing, by implication, the precise state of events in the real world. Later on, in an often-quoted passage (*Laws* 3.700a-701b), Plato makes his meaning more explicitly pejorative, describing the adjudication process as “a

vile theatrocracy” (θεατροκρατία τις πονηρὰ) characterized by raucous hissing, shouting, and clapping from the mob.⁴³ In each of these passages, then, the problem with existing arrangements is that the prize winners are selected by ignorant and undiscerning audiences and that the judges are either unwilling or unable to make up their own minds. Given such conditions, the prizes themselves are necessarily devalued.

It is interesting that Plato uses the image of teachers and pupils to describe the adjudication. As he presents it, the function of poetry is to educate as well as to give pleasure—a dual function which is amply attested elsewhere, by Plato himself and many others⁴⁴—but whereas the *poet* was normally cast in the role of teacher, here Plato says that it is the *judges* who ought to be the teachers. (He goes on to repeat explicitly that in the real world it is the *spectators* who are the teachers.⁴⁵) This unusual adaptation of the familiar motif is due to Plato’s concern with the problem of ensuring that the *correct* “lessons” are learnt from poetry. One of the main problems with poetry in performance, according to the *Republic*, is that it is difficult to control the (potentially numerous and divergent) ways in which its audiences might interpret it.⁴⁶ But if the meaning or message of a play is out of its author’s hands, it remains open to the judges to make sure that the correct lessons are learnt—by implication—through the awarding of the prize to the most edifying work. Thus, for Plato, the award of a prize is not only a decision which confers value on literature, but inherently (and crucially) an act of *interpretation*.

In the *Laws* Plato can be seen as substantially modifying his position in the *Republic*, where poetry was banned altogether from the ideal state;⁴⁷ but even now poetry is admitted into society only by removing from the poets control over their own works.⁴⁸ Furthermore, if the power of the judges is increased, their character and capacity for discernment become more important considerations. Ideally there would not be ten judges, but a single figure, distinguished by virtue and education (ἕνα τὸν ἀρετῆι τε καὶ παιδείαι διαφέροντα): such a judge is seen as the best figure to lead the young to the principles of true wisdom.⁴⁹ All of this is a very long way from the reality of dramatic competitions in classical Athens.

43. On *theatrokratia* cf. Pl. *Rep.* 6.429b; Demosth. *in Meid.* 226; Pollux 4.88; Athen. 13.583–84; Plut. *Quomodo adulator* 63a, *De aud. poet.* 33c. For recent discussion see Wallace 1997.

44. E.g. Pl. *Protag.* (esp. 312b, 318e, 325d–e), *Rep.* 2.376–3.398, 10.606d–607a; cf. Xenophanes B10 DK; Heraclitus B57 DK; Herodotus 2.53; Ar. *Frogs* 686, 1008–77, etc. See (*inter alia*) Ford 2002: 197–208; Herington 1985: 22–25.

45. Pl. *Laws* 2.659c1 (οἱ θεαταὶ παιδεύουσιν).

46. Pl. *Rep.* 2.376c–388d.

47. This is made explicit at *Laws* 2.672a–b.

48. Later on in the same book of the *Laws* (2.665b–e) Plato develops this argument even further along the same lines, suggesting that not just the adjudication but the dramatic performances themselves ought to be in the hands of an élite group (a “Chorus of Dionysus,” formed of old, wise men).

49. Is the verdict of a single judge better than that of the multitude? Ar. *Pol.* 3.1281b7 gives a contrasting view (and one which contradicts his own views elsewhere).

The real problem with the current system, for Plato, is that audiences and judges alike are deficient in knowledge; but, as we see a little later in the dialogue (*Laws* 2.668c-670b), it is a particular type of specialist knowledge that is required. The person who is to judge a literary work unerringly must know in each case the exact nature of that work and (most significantly) what it represents; for if he does not recognize its “essence” (οὐσία), its “intention” (τί ποτε βούλεται), or the “true original” which it represents (ὅτου ποτ’ ἐστὶν εἰκλὼν ὄντως), he will not be able to discern whether the artwork succeeds or fails (668c6–8). In other words, Plato is operating with an extremely specific conception of “correctness” (τὸ ὀρθῶς) in mimetic poetry, which relates back to his theory of knowledge in general and (in particular) his theory of Forms.⁵⁰ Such ideas are, naturally, beyond the grasp of the “great mass” in the audience (ὁ πολὺς ὄχλος, 670b8–12).

Plato’s “anti-prize” opinions are not straightforward expressions of élitism: they have to be interpreted in the light of his philosophical opinions. Plato (unlike certain other “anti-prize” critics) is not simply out to discredit festival judges and audiences. Indeed, as it turns out, he is not exclusively concerned with dramatic competitions. Rather, he is concerned to put forward a distinctively Platonic way of reading texts in general. The type of literary-critical activity described here is a highly specialized, idiosyncratic process, very different in kind from the judgment of the spectators at the festival (and, for that matter, that of most critics or readers).

Plato has his own particular perspective on the prize system, then; and, like Aristotle (to whom we shall return later), his objections to the conduct of literary competitions are meant to be understood in the context of a wider system of philosophical ideas about poetry and its role in education and society. But views of this type are not confined to critics of the “philosophical” type. Others too view the prize-awarding audience as an ignorant rabble in a more general sense. For example, Vitruvius, a very different sort of writer, describes the adjudication of an odd—almost certainly fictional—poetic contest organized by Ptolemy Philadelphus and attended by the grammarian Aristophanes of Byzantium:

Cum recitarentur scripta, populus cunctus significando monebat iudices quod probarent. Itaque, cum ab singulis sententiae sunt rogatae, sex una dixerunt et, quem maxime animadverterunt multitudini placuisse, ei primum praemium, insequenti secundum tribuerunt. Aristophanes vero, cum ab eo sententia rogaretur, eum primum renuntiari iussit, qui minime populo placuisset.

Vitruvius *de Arch.* 7, pr. 6

While the poets read their texts the whole population told the judges how to cast their votes by shouting at them. And thus, when their verdicts were called for, one by one, the six judges unanimously awarded first prize to the poet who they thought most pleased the multitude, and they

50. Cf. his discussion of poetry in *Rep.* 10 (and see Halliwell 1988: 1–29).

awarded second prize to the next most pleasing. But Aristophanes, when asked for his opinion, told them to choose as victor the poet who least pleased the crowd. . .⁵¹

This has been described, rightly, as an “absurd and anachronistic” anecdote.⁵² Nevertheless, even if the story is unhistorical in its precise details, the underlying assumptions about the relative power of the audience and judges are significant. The anecdote represents the sort of view that an educated Roman of the first century might have of literary prize winning in general, and it suggests that a certain type of view of earlier Greek competitions, and their (un-)fairness, had filtered down through the critical tradition of several centuries.

The most important feature of Vitruvius’ story is the discrepancy between the judgment of the professional critic (Aristophanes, the literary scholar *par excellence*) and that of the amateur judges and the misguided audience. Before Aristophanes’ extraordinary intervention, the audience (as elsewhere) are seen as dictating the verdict, despite the presence of a panel of six official judges. Aristophanes’ suggestion that the prize should go to the *least* popular playwright is eventually adopted, but this is clearly implied to be the precise opposite of what normally happened at competitions. The point of the story seems to be that audiences are prone to making the “wrong” decision. Vitruvius muddies the waters somewhat by adding later that the most crowd-pleasing poets were plagiarists, not necessarily bad poets as such. Even so, the correct judgment is still seen as relying on the expertise of a professional scholar, who is sufficiently learned to be able to detect plagiarism: it is this specialized knowledge and experience that the ignorant spectators and judges lack. True criticism, then, requires learning—this time not the epistemology and moral wisdom of the Platonic judge, but the erudition of a bookish Alexandrian scholar.

Other Roman writers touch on the theme of vulgar audiences versus discerning critics. Ovid, writing about mimes, remarks that a poet’s popular success is likely to be in direct proportion to the vulgarity of his theme;⁵³ while Horace, who calls the audiences of tragedy “ignorant and stolid” (*indocti stolidique*), advises the aspiring author not to bother about courting the admiration of the public, but instead to be content to have a few discerning readers.⁵⁴ Of course, these authors were writing many years later than the classical Athenian contests, and they would have had in mind (at least in part) a rather different type of audience and performance context. Essentially, though, these views are all variations on a theme which was already present in the fifth century. For instance, the “Old Oligarch” mentions theatrical competitions in the course of his scathing description of the

51. Vitruvius *de Arch.* 7, pr. 6.

52. Csapo and Slater 1994: 163.

53. *Ov. Trist.* 2.498–501.

54. *Hor. Epis.* 2.1.184; *Sat.* 1.10.72–74. Horace elsewhere (*Ars P.* 224) adds that all the spectators of Greek tragedy were drunk!

demos, saying that the mob has taken over and “ruined” (καταλέλυκεν) what were previously noble pastimes.⁵⁵ His attitude, though it is embedded in fifth-century social and political concerns,⁵⁶ is none the less an expression of the same problem dealt with by Plato and the Roman writers (not to mention Bourdieu): the clash between vulgar and élite values.

The same theme is also seen very prominently in fifth-century comedy. For instance, the chorus leader in Aristophanes’ *Wasps* takes his own audience to task for failing to appreciate his previous play (the *Clouds* of 423), saying:

μέμψασθαι γὰρ τοῖσι θεαταῖς ὁ ποιητῆς νῦν ἐπιθυμεῖ.
ἀδικεῖσθαι γάρ φησιν πρότερος πόλλ’ αὐτοὺς εὖ πεποιηχῶς·
....
πέρυσιν καταπροὔδοτε καινοτάτας σπείραντ’ αὐτὸν διανοίας,
ὅς ὑπὸ τοῦ μὴ γινῶναι καθαρῶς ὑμεῖς ἐποίησατ’ ἀναλδεῖς·
καίτοι σπένδων πόλλ’ ἐπὶ πολλοῖς ὄμνυσιν τὸν Διόνυσον
μὴ πώποτ’ ἀμείνον’ ἔπη τούτων κωμωιδικὰ μηδέν’ ἀκοῦσαι.
τοῦτο μὲν οὖν ἐσθ’ ὑμῖν αἰσχρὸν τοῖς μὴ γνοῦσιν παραχρηῖμα,
ὁ δὲ ποιητῆς οὐδὲν χείρων παρὰ τοῖσι σοφοῖς νενόμισται,
εἰ παρελαύνων τοὺς ἀντιπάλους τὴν ἐπίνοιαν ζυνέτριψεν.

Ar. *Wasps* 1016–17, 1044–50

At this point the author wishes to criticize the audience: he says that you’ve treated him unjustly, even after he’s given you such a lot of marvelous stuff in the past. . . . But last year you betrayed him—he was trying to sow a crop of new ideas, but you ruined the whole thing because of your complete stupidity. He’ll go even further and swear by Dionysus—not just with one libation, in fact, but with several—that you never did hear a better comedy than *Clouds*. Well, the shame is entirely yours, you ignorant lot! The smart ones out there won’t think any less of the author if he overtook his rivals by being too clever.⁵⁷

Incidentally, this parabolic passage reveals some of the qualities that are seen as desirable in a “good” piece of writing. Novelty, in both form and content, is important—a criterion mentioned elsewhere in comedy (just as, conversely, a rival poet’s lack of novelty is often condemned or ridiculed).⁵⁸ It is also claimed that clever ideas are important, and attention is drawn to linguistic texture and verbal inventiveness. All of these admirable features are presented as, specifically, criteria for winning a prize. Nevertheless, *Clouds*, despite meeting all the criteria, failed to win—and it is the fault of the audience, for being so stupid.

55. [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.13. Cf. Wilson 2000: 14 on the fifth-century “democratization” of *mousike*.

56. See Forrest 1975.

57. Ar. *Wasps* 1016–17, 1044–50.

58. E.g. Ar. *Clouds* 547, *Eccl.* 576–87, *Telemessians* fr. 543 K-A; Metagenes fr. 14 K-A; Pherecrates fr. 84 K-A; cf. *Frogs* 1–20 (on the lack of novelty). Discussed by Sommerstein 1992: 17–19. Cf. comedy’s “running gags” about plagiarism: see Ruffell 2002.

The type of material favored by the audience is not the verbally sophisticated, philosophically inventive humor of *Clouds*, but something altogether cruder, more straightforward, and more familiar.

In a later play, *Frogs*, an Aristophanic character gives an example of this “successful” type of comedy: we learn that “the usual jokes, the ones that always make the audience laugh” (*Frogs* 1–2) involve farting and servants being beaten up. We are told that Aristophanes’ rivals, Cratinus and Ameipsias, go in for this type of thing; and we recall, perhaps, that it was Cratinus who defeated *Clouds* in 423. But the situation is not so clear-cut as all that, since here Aristophanes himself, ironically, is putting on stage precisely the type of jokes from which he seems to be distancing himself. Furthermore, a parabolic passage from one of Cratinus’ own comedies shows that Cratinus too could present his work as sophisticated and misunderstood:

χαῖρ’ ὦ μέγ’ ἀχρειόγελως ὄμιλε, ταῖς ἐπιβδαῖς
τῆς ἡμετέρας σοφίας κριτῆς ἄριστε πάντων. . .

Cratinus fr. 360, from an unknown play

Greetings to you, o crowd, you who laugh out loudly at the wrong point, you who are the best possible judge of our cleverness—except on the festival day itself!

So Aristophanes was clearly not the only comedian to question his audience’s critical acumen: I suspect that fifth-century audiences were accustomed to hearing this sort of complaint rather often.⁵⁹

On one reading, the entire plot of *Frogs* can be interpreted as a sustained, ironic critique of the Athenian prize-awarding system in general.⁶⁰ The play begins with Dionysus undertaking a search for his favorite dead poet, Euripides, but culminates in a poetic *agon* in Hades between Euripides and Aeschylus—a contest which can obviously be seen as a counterpart to the adjudication at the Dionysia or Lenaea. By setting up a situation where Euripides, despite being the “obvious” winner, not to mention Dionysus’ (and perhaps Aristophanes’ own?)⁶¹ favorite, ultimately *fails* to win the prize, Aristophanes can be seen as criticizing a system in which incompetent judges routinely award prizes on an arbitrary basis to “the wrong” candidates.

ΞΑ. κρινεῖ δὲ δὴ τίς ταῦτα;

ΟΙ. τοῦτ’ ἦν δύσκολον·

59. Cf. a fragment of Eupolis (392 K-A) which also seems to be reproaching his audience for their failure to appreciate good comedy.

60. The interpretation of *Frogs* suggested here is only briefly sketched: I develop it at some length in Wright forthcoming.

61. Murray 1933: 107: “It is difficult for us, and would have been difficult for Aristophanes himself, to say exactly what his feelings were towards Euripides and his poetry.” But Aristophanes’ intense interest in Euripides, and the intimate knowledge of the poet’s works displayed in his paratragic scenes, is scarcely a sign that Aristophanes thought Euripides a bad poet.

σοφῶν γὰρ ἀνδρῶν ἀπορίαν ἠύρισκέτην.
 οὔτε γὰρ Ἀθηναίοισι συνέβαιν' Αἰσχύλος—
 ΞΑ. πολλοὺς ἴσως ἐνόμιζε τοὺς τοιχωρύχους.
 ΟΙ.—λῆρόν τε τᾶλλ' ἤγειτο τοῦ γνῶναι πέρι
 φύσεις ποιητῶν.

Frogs 805–10

Xanthias: So who is actually going to judge this competition?

Slave: That was a tricky decision. The two playwrights found that there was a shortage of discerning people. Aeschylus would not agree to having the Athenians as judges—

Xanthias: He probably thought that most of them were criminals!

Slave: —and he thought that the rest of them were inept at making judgments on the quality of poets.⁶²

As before, the audience are criticized for their lack of discernment. But in this contest, the decision-making power is taken out of the hands of the spectators and given instead to Dionysus, “because of his long experience of the art” (ὅτι τῆς τέχνης ἔμπειρος ἦν, 811). As has been pointed out, this is scarcely any better than the *status quo*. In the first place, Dionysus in his comic persona is a buffoon.⁶³ Furthermore, Dionysus, as god of the theatre, can be thought of as having presided over, and thus approved, the award of *all* previous (faulty) prizes, and his verdict in the *agon* of Euripides and Aeschylus thus typifies the sort of faulty decision that one comes to expect at the god’s festivals. The final joke in *Frogs* is that Euripides is not even allowed the runner-up prize: second prize is awarded to Sophocles (who did not even take part in the contest), and Euripides comes a measly third!⁶⁴

The people in the audience do not emerge well from all this. But how did they respond to being presented in such an unflattering way? It is hard to say. The only two ancient sources who mention audience abuse are unhelpful and contradictory.⁶⁵ It is possible that the audience would have interpreted the comedians’ abuse ironically, and enjoyed it as part of the joke. But it is also possible that the playwrights were being deadly serious, and genuinely insulting to at least a large proportion of the audience members, when they denounced them as stupid. As modern parallels show, the dividing line between ironic insults and genuine rancor can be uncomfortably narrow: comedians whose stage acts rely on

62. *Frogs* 805–10.

63. In such plays as Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandros*, Aristomenes’ *Dionysus Shipwrecked*, Eupolis’ *Taxiarchs*, etc. See Sommerstein 1997: 11 on Dionysus as “anti-hero”; cf. Dover 1993: 10. Dionysus is sometimes seen as the “typical” or even “ideal” Athenian spectator: see Slater 2000. The identification of an “idiotic” Dionysus with the Athenian audience is *not* problematic if we are prepared to see the *demos* as a load of idiots as well.

64. *Frogs* 1515–23.

65. [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.18 says that the *demos* dislikes being abused in comedy (he means that they are not made the target of satire, but generalized abuse may be seen as part of the same phenomenon). Dio Chrys. *Or.* 33.9, by contrast, says that audiences *enjoy* being abused and tend to award the prize to the poet who abuses them most heartily.

verbal abuse, such as Bill Hicks, Bernard Manning, and Al Murray, can often cause genuine offence.

It is difficult to interpret these passages, just as it is difficult to reach a definitive understanding of many of the jokes in ancient comedy. This is due not to the time lag involved, nor to the impossibility of locating the author's personal voice in among the plurality of views expressed by his characters, but mainly to the pervasive presence of irony. Because comedy relies for its effect on irony, every utterance, however apparently straightforward, might turn out to have a meaning subtly—or completely—different from its surface meaning. These insults to the spectators could work as jokes if they were interpreted ironically as meaning the complete opposite of what they seemed to mean: that is, as good-natured joshing, or an eccentric sort of *captatio benevolentiae*. But they *could* function equally well as serious expressions of disdain for *hoi polloi* from disgruntled and undervalued playwrights (who, one notes, were not otherwise renowned for their democratic sympathies). Without any firm clues apart from the words in the script, either interpretation is possible.⁶⁶

Those who interpret these insults as ironical cannot believe that a playwright would have run the risk of alienating his audience and thus endangered his chances of winning the prize. But this objection (along with much of what is written about comedy) relies on an unexamined preconception about the “competitive spirit” of the writers. As I have said, we cannot automatically assume that literary competitions are essentially the same as other types of competition (or that ancient agonistic culture in general was homogeneous). In particular, *there is no reason to assume that all playwrights actually cared whether or not they won prizes*. This may perhaps seem a controversial statement, but actually it is perfectly plausible. In the absence of any evidence to show what the playwrights actually thought (apart from statements in the mouths of their characters), it is just as likely as the alternative view.⁶⁷

Why enter a competition which one does not necessarily want to win? I suggest that the judges' verdict may well have been of consequence to the actors, the *choregoi*, and even the Athenian people at large, but that for the tragic and comic poets themselves the most important consideration was not to come first, but to be awarded a chorus—that is, to be given the opportunity to mount an extravagant performance of their work at somebody else's expense. Whatever Aristotle and others might have thought, drama needs a *stage* for maximum effect—which in classical Athens meant obtaining a performance slot at a festival. Getting through the initial selection procedure, then, would have been far more important than

66. On the difficulties inherent in interpreting “the poet's voice” in comedy, or unearthing the range of assumptions which underlie the irony, see Chirico 1990; cf. Silk 2000: 42–48 (who concludes that Aristophanic irony is designed to be deliberately uncommunicative and infuriatingly elusive).

67. In fact Horace (though he is not directly comparable to the fifth-century dramatists) does represent the view that poets disdained prizes: *Epis.* 2.1.177–86.

winning first prize. (In a sense, then, the ultimate “critic” would have been the archon who drew up the shortlist of competitors.)⁶⁸

Not to be awarded a chorus at all would be humiliating,⁶⁹ but to be placed first—or second—or third—by an ignorant audience may well have been a matter of comparative indifference to the playwrights (whatever they might profess in their plays). In any case, it has been argued that winning second or third prize did not necessarily constitute “failure” as such, though of course it could selectively be presented or perceived as such in certain situations.⁷⁰ If this is true, the comedians’ recurrent focus on winning or losing can be seen, along with their various other jokes about their rivals, as part of a system of stock “running gags,”⁷¹ rather than as literal statements of personal ambition. It was *funny* to complain about unjust treatment at the hands of audiences and judges, because the outcomes of the competitions were no more to be taken seriously as artistic judgments than (let us say) the verdicts of the judges at the Eurovision Song Contest. A somewhat better recent parallel (in Britain) is provided by television panel games such as *Have I Got News For You* and *QI*,⁷² where there is never more than a basic pretence that the competing teams are trying to win. What is at stake is not getting the answers right and scoring points, but simply cracking jokes: the competitive element is practically absent, and often the rival teams’ scores are not even counted up. I suggest that this is more or less how the ancient comic “competition” worked.

Of course, this is not to say that no poet *ever* wanted to win a prize, just that prize winning need not have been invariably the chief concern of each competing poet. The truth about how comic or tragic playwrights perceived their own work, and the way in which they constructed their ideas of value and prestige, is likely to have been rather more complex or difficult to pin down. In the end, the huge gaps in our evidence mean that we can never know what these competing playwrights really thought about prizes. Even if we could interview Aristophanes or Euripides, it is unlikely that a definitive answer would emerge. This is because, as parallels from the modern world show, public statements made by writers about prizes won by themselves and others tend (for whatever reason) to be characterized by a recurrent irony, ambivalence, or inconsistency. Creative artists of all types tend,

68. Poets may have read specimens of their work to the archon in their bid to be awarded a chorus (this is implied by Pl. *Leg.* 7.817d): see Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 84.

69. Even so, Cratinus seems to have managed to turn this fate to comic effect: *Cowherd* fr. 20 K-A.

70. See Stevens 1956, discussed further in IV(e) below. It is important that literary contests, in common with athletic and other types of ancient contest, ranked *all* the competitors rather than selecting a single winner: Osborne 1993: 30 identifies this as a characteristic feature of Greek festivals.

71. Such “running gags” have been discussed with great insight and sophistication by Ruffell 2002, Sidwell 1995, and Storey 2003.

72. *Have I Got News For You*: Hat Trick Productions for BBC Television, 1990–present. *QI*: Talkback Thames Productions for BBC Television, 2005–present. The website www.bbc.co.uk/comedy contains excellent information about all aspects of these shows, including (crucially) their paradoxically non-competitive ethos.

from time to time, either to celebrate or to play down winning or losing, in a way that is basically impossible to interpret.⁷³ We are all no doubt familiar with artists who have publicly devalued or refused prizes. Woody Allen, to take just one example, notoriously disdains to attend Oscars award ceremonies, letting it be known that he prefers to spend the evening at a jazz club. Allen's film *Annie Hall* (1977) contains the line: "Awards! All they do is give out awards! I can't believe it: 'Greatest Fascist Dictator: Adolf Hitler.'" Yet this film also won four Academy Awards, which Allen was happy to accept.⁷⁴ Just how much disingenuousness lies behind ironical, or semi-ironical, posturing of this sort?

It is impossible to answer that question definitively: indeed, it is probable that the artists themselves do not entirely know the answer. But it seems fitting to conclude this section by quoting from the ironical speech delivered at the Booker Prize ceremony of 1986 by Kingsley Amis (who won the prize with his novel *The Old Devils*): "Until just now I had thought the Booker Prize a rather trivial, showbizzy caper, but now I consider it a very serious, reliable indication of literary merit." In his *Memoirs*, where Amis discusses this speech and the hostile reaction it produced, he adds: "Memo to writers and others: Never make a joke against or about yourself that some little bastard can turn into a piece of shit and send your way."⁷⁵

IV(B): THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF PRODUCTION ADVERSELY AFFECT ART AND JUDGEMENT

The two most influential critics of all, Plato and Aristotle, argue that the judges' decisions are not just irrelevant but actually inimical to genuine literary appreciation and, furthermore, that the influence of prizes on artists is detrimental, since they encourage playwrights to produce bad, flashy, or superficial works in order to please the crowd. This viewpoint might imply that some poets did, after all, write primarily with a view to winning prizes (or, at least, that Plato and Aristotle *thought* they did). But, as I said above, no doubt some poets did pander to the audience, at least from time to time; it is also clear that Plato and Aristotle's impression of the situation is based largely on the practice of the worst poets. In a number of passages apart from those already mentioned, Plato states (or implies) that literature is debased by the need to satisfy theatre audiences,⁷⁶ and, in the passage from the *Laws* discussed above (2.659c4–7), he declares explicitly

73. As English 2005: 1 puts it, his subject is "the collective ambivalence in which these prizes are embedded, and which perhaps more than anything else accounts for our failure to come to terms with their ascendancy."

74. See Meade 2000.

75. Amis 1991: 325. Interestingly, Amis' latest biographer (Powell 2008: 228) interprets Amis' Booker acceptance speech completely *unironically*, writing that Amis was "thrilled" and had genuinely been "instantly converted" to literary prizes. This example illustrates just how difficult it is to unearth writers' real views about prestige and value.

76. Pl. *Apol.* 18c-d, *Gorg.* 501d-502d, *Rep.* 6.493a, 10.602b, *Symp.* 175e.

that competitions have “corrupted” the poets as well as the judges’ standards of pleasure. However, it is Aristotle who goes into some detail about the precise nature of the effect of competitions upon playwrights.

In the *Poetics* (6.1450b) Aristotle highlights the important fact that the competitions did not differentiate between plays, playwrights, producers, or actors.⁷⁷ Indeed, it seems inevitable that, despite anyone’s best intentions, the quality of the acting would have influenced audiences and judges more than any other aspect of the production. It was probably for this reason that a “Best Actor” prize was instituted ca. 440 BC, to focus the judges’ attention on the quality of the plays themselves.⁷⁸ Aristotle mentions the acting prizes in his section on *hypokrisis* in the *Rhetoric* (3.1403b-1404a): he says that these prizes are won by actors who are good at delivery, but he adds that actors still have more influence than poets in contests generally. Aristotle goes on to compare dramatic contests to political ones: in both spheres it is the vulgar, ignorant character of the listeners that is seen as responsible for the conduct and outcome of events. Dramatic performances are seen as a form of rhetoric (which is itself a “vulgar” art),⁷⁹ winning over the opinion of audiences or judges.⁸⁰ Once again, as elsewhere, the point is the audiences miss the real meaning of the material presented to them, and that their judgment is based on superficial or misguided criteria.

Elsewhere Aristotle describes the effect of competition on the literary works themselves. His chief cause for complaint is in the area of plot. The audiences and judges are said to prefer badly constructed, “episodic” plot-lines, in which the order of events is not probable or necessary:

τοιαῦται δὲ ποιοῦνται ὑπὸ μὲν τῶν φαύλων ποιητῶν δι’ αὐτούς, ὑπὸ δὲ τῶν ἀγαθῶν διὰ τοὺς ὑποκριτάς· ἀγωνίσματα γὰρ ποιοῦντες καὶ παρὰ τὴν δύναμιν παρατείνοντες τὸν μῦθον πολλάκις διαστρέφειν ἀναγκάζονται τὸ ἐφεξῆς.

Ar. *Poet.* 9.1451b35–37

These are made by bad poets on their own account, and by good poets because of the judges; since they are writing competition-pieces, and

77. Ar. *Poet.* 6.1450b. However, Ar. overlooks the fact that (in the fifth century, at least) playwrights were also responsible for directing their own plays: see Taplin 1978. Cf. Wilson 2000: 99–100 on the monuments that record victories in an unsystematic way, often omitting the names of poets or confusing *poietes*, *didaskalos*, and *choregos* (e.g. *IG* I³.969, *IG* II².2325). There is some doubt whether the judges voted for poets or directors: see Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 85.

78. See Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 95. The acting prize need not go to the performance in a winning play (e.g. *IG* II².2319, referring to the prizes in 418).

79. The precise meaning of the term used by Aristotle (*φορτικός*) is difficult to convey: it has some but not all of the overtones of the English word “vulgar,” but in *Rhet.* it seems to be used primarily of a certain style of rhetorical delivery. Nevertheless, one notes that Aristotle uses the same word to describe his rivals (*Clouds* 525ff.).

80. For a similar, though not identical, view one might cite the fifth-century writer Gorgias, who compares the effect on the listener of tragedy, rhetoric, and other types of illusion: DK82 B23; cf. his *Encomium of Helen* (DK82 B11). Discussed by Pohlenz 1920: 156–68; Segal 1962.

stretching the plot beyond its limits, they are often compelled to distort the order of events.⁸¹

It is slightly frustrating that here, as elsewhere in the *Poetics*, Aristotle does not illustrate his point in more detail, but presumably he is referring to sensational plot “twists” of a type not strictly necessitated by the events. However, Aristotle’s derogatory description is not simply a comment on the festival judges, but rather it reflects his own idiosyncratic preference for a particular pattern of “complex” plot.⁸² Elsewhere, he does supply an example of a supposedly faulty, crowd-pleasing plot-structure: it is the type of plot, like the *Odyssey*, that has a “double” arrangement ending with opposite fortunes for good and bad people.

δοκεῖ δὲ εἶναι πρώτη διὰ τὴν τῶν θεάτρων ἀσθένειαν· ἀκολουθοῦσι γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ κατ’ εὐχὴν ποιοῦντες τοῖς θεαταῖς.

Ar. *Poet.* 13.1453a33–35

It is thought to be the best because of the weakness of the spectators: the poets follow the lead of the spectators and make the sort of plays that they want to watch.⁸³

This is evidently a different sort of plot from the one criticized above. This time, it is not so much the arrangement of events within the plot-structure but their entire nature or conception: Aristotle is describing a particular choice of myth rather than a poet’s specific handling of that myth. Audiences are said to prefer an ethically simplistic situation with contrasting fates for heroes and villains; this contrasts with Aristotle’s own preferred sort of plot, which is more concerned with moral grey areas and “in-between” types of character.⁸⁴ Aristotle is well known to prefer complexity to simplicity (on his own specific definitions of these terms); but audiences cannot appreciate complexity—not only because of their own limitations, but also because it is just more difficult to appreciate complexity in performance. One has to *read* plays in order to appreciate this complex quality; and so for Aristotle the sort of play that works best on stage, and wins prizes, is inherently not the best type of play.

IV(C): PERFORMANCES ARE DIFFERENT FROM TEXTS AND LITERATURE

The “anti-prize” views that we have been discussing so far make sense in the light of Bourdieu’s analysis of the “dualist” structure of the cultural field—we are seeing the emergence of a distinct “field of restricted production.”⁸⁵ But these assorted ancient views do not simply represent an attempt to distinguish high-brow

81. Ar. *Poet.* 9.1451b35–37.

82. See Finkelberg 2006 on “episodic” plots.

83. One notes the similarity of this view to that of Plato in *Laws* 2.658e–9b (discussed above).

84. Cf. *Poet.* 13.1452b–15.1454b.

85. Bourdieu 1993: 130; Bourdieu 1996: 141–73. (Cf. Part II above.)

art from *l'art moyen*. There is something else more specific at stake. It could be argued that all these ancient writers are, in different ways, attempting to distinguish the purely *literary* or *textual* aspect of ancient drama as an area of study separate from all its other (not just performative) aspects. The tragedies, comedies, and satyr-plays were just one, comparatively small, constituent part of huge public festivals which carried a great deal of religious and political significance, and it is clear that the award of prizes was often (implicitly or openly) a political decision. Modern criticism has swung back in the opposite direction, privileging the “context” of ancient drama—its socio-political and religious aspects—above its value as “literature”; but in ancient criticism there is a clearly discernible movement to *decontextualize* literary works, and a growing sense that the job of the critic is to evaluate *texts* pure and simple.⁸⁶

Aristotle is again the most influential proponent of such a view. Many have noted his tendency to play down the performative and visual side of tragedy (in particular, his view that “spectacle” (ὄψις) is the least important of the constituent parts of tragedy);⁸⁷ he never mentions religion or ritual at all; he similarly overlooks politics.⁸⁸ Indeed, his whole understanding of tragedy in the *Poetics* is based on its supposed predilection for “universals” (τὰ καθόλου) rather than “particulars.”⁸⁹ This approach to drama, which strips away historical context in favor of more timeless values, devalues not only the award of prizes but also the festival and public performance as a whole. Performance is seen as an irrelevant distraction, for “a tragedy can do its job without performance and actors.”⁹⁰ Literary criticism is all about the words in the text, as Aristotle makes clear by comparing tragedy to non-mimetic forms of literature: “tragedy produces its meaning without movement, just as epic does: a reading makes its meaning quite clear.”⁹¹ Elsewhere, Aristotle concedes that pity and fear can be elicited by the stage action, but also simply by the plot: this is really a more important consideration and the sign of a better poet.⁹²

The postulation of an ideal audience of discerning *readers* is an important part of Aristotle’s achievement as a critic, and one that reflects the growth of literary scholarship and the book trade in his own time. The same idea is developed further by another extremely influential critic several centuries later.⁹³ Longinus’ treatise

86. Cf. Bourdieu 1993: 8: “The affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object of representation, is the most specific expression of the field’s claim to produce and impose the principles of a properly cultural legitimacy regarding both the production and reception of an artwork.”

87. Ar. *Poet.* 7.1450b; cf. Lucas 1968 ad loc.

88. Hall 1996, notably, concludes that there is “no *polis* in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.”

89. Ar. *Poet.* 9.1451b.

90. Ar. *Poet.* 6.1450b.

91. Ar. *Poet.* 26.1462a.

92. Ar. *Poet.* 14.1453b. Here, as often, Aristotle’s meaning is problematic, since he implies that one does not even need to *read* the play but only to hear the plot summarized: see Lucas 1968 ad loc.

93. On the date and authorship of *de Subl.* see Russell 1964: xxii-xxx.

On the Sublime—perhaps the most fully developed classical exposition of what Bourdieu would call “autonomous” art—has more to say about the activity of the professional critic and the act of reading. In a famous formulation,⁹⁴ Longinus declares that literary criticism (λόγων κρίσις) comes only as the final result of long experience—by which he means reading and re-reading. But such a prolonged, intimate relationship with the texts was impossible for the competition judges. Given what is known of the festival set-up, it seems almost inevitable that adjudication followed directly on the performances.⁹⁵ This meant that, even if the judges had access to texts of the competing plays,⁹⁶ their decision had to be hasty and *non-reflective*—the direct opposite of what Longinus sees as true criticism.

These views might seem difficult to reconcile with Longinus’ apparently approving attitude to prizes (*de Subl.* 33.1, 33.4, 35.2: quoted in Part III above). But, although his language does reflect the procedure at festivals,⁹⁷ Longinus is definitely not talking about actual prizes. His subject is literature of all sorts, not specifically drama (or any other type of literature composed for competition). When he refers to prizes, he is not talking literally about the awards made in any real-life competition; these are abstract, metaphorical “prizes” corresponding to the judgments of experienced, civilized literary critics like Longinus himself. His borrowing of a metaphor is simultaneously a criticism of the competition system. Despite his admission that rivalry, and the ambition it produces, can make poets better (44.1–4), and despite his implication that in general it is a desirable thing to win prizes, Longinus is in fact rejecting the existing culture of prize-awarding. He is not opposed to prizes altogether, but he is suggesting a radically different type of judgment and a qualitatively different, more elite, type of prize. The true “judges,” he claims, are in fact posterity and the whole of human experience:

εἰ γε ἐκλέξας τὰ Ὅμηρου, τὰ Δημοσθένους, τὰ Πλάτωνος, τῶν ἄλλων ὅσοι δὴ μέγιστοι παραπτώματα πάντα ὁμόσε συναθροίσειεν, ἐλάχιστον ἂν τι, μᾶλλον δ’ οὐδὲ πολλοστημόριον ἂν εὐρεθείη τῶν ἐκείνοις τοῖς ἥρωσι πάντη κατορθουμένων. διὰ ταῦθ’ ὁ πᾶς αὐτοῖς αἰὼν καὶ βίος, οὐ δυνάμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ φθόνου παρανοίας ἀλῶναι, φέρων ἀπέδωκε τὰ νικητήρια, καὶ ἄχρι νῦν ἀναφαίρετα φυλάττει, καὶ ἔοικε τηρήσειν ἔστ’ ἂν ὕδωρ τε ῥέηι καὶ δένδρεα μακρὰ τεθήληι.

Long. *De Subl.* 36.2.

If you were to pick out and assemble together all the mistakes made by Homer, Demosthenes, Plato, and all the other great writers, the total would be very many times less numerous than all the felicities which one could find in the works of these heroes. Thus the whole of time and

94. Long. *De Subl.* 6.1.

95. See Marshall and van Willigenburg 2004. Cf. *Ar. Eccl.* 1154–62, which implies that the last performance of the day had an unfair advantage over the others, since it would be fresh in the judges’ minds when they considered their verdict.

96. This is unlikely but not impossible: see Page 1934: 108.

97. In particular, L. mentions the voting (33.4).

the sum of human experience, judges whose sanity cannot be doubted by envious detractors, take the crowns of victory and place them firmly on their head; they maintain their prizes irrevocably, and will in all likelihood keep them as long as water flows and tall trees flourish.

This last sentence naturally implies that in real life the judges' decisions have (on particular occasions or in general) been so misguided as to seem "insane"—powerful condemnation indeed.

The critics' focus on texts and literature is connected to a debate about the type of value possessed by good writing. Longinus' view is that in the real world prizes denote ephemeral, not permanent, value: the qualities that abide are different in kind from the qualities that win prizes at festivals. And, as before, the value of the judgment depends on the nature of the judge:

ὅταν οὖν ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς ἔμφορον καὶ ἐμπείρου λόγων πολλάκις ἀκουόμενόν τι πρὸς μεγαλοφροσύνην τὴν ψυχὴν μὴ συνδιατιθῆι μηδ' ἐγκαταλείπηι τῆι διανοίᾳ πλεῖον τοῦ λεγομένου τὸ ἀναθεωρούμενον, πίπτῃ δέ, ἂν αὐτὸ συνεχὲς ἐπισκοπῆις, εἰς ἀπαύξησιν, οὐκ ἂν ἔτ' ἀληθὲς ὕψος εἶη μέχρι μόνῃς τῆς ἀκοῆς σωιζόμενον. τοῦτο γὰρ τῶι ὄντι μέγα, οὗ πολλὴ μὲν ἡ ἀναθεώρησις...

Long. *De Subl.* 7.2–3

If a man of discernment and literary expertise hears a thing many times over, and it fails to dispose his soul to greatness or to leave him with more food for reflection than just the words themselves, but instead seems diminished upon repeated inspection, this is not genuine sublimity: it endures only for the moment of hearing. *Genuine* sublimity contains substantial food for thought, and bears repeated inspection.⁹⁸

It is the precise *timescale* of the critic's activity that is important here. If true criticism depends on prolonged reflection, the material under consideration must necessarily last for longer than a single moment. Thus dramatic performances are ruled out as inherently impossible to criticize properly, and the focus shifts to texts as artifacts, whose physical survival is imperative. It would all have been very different in an age of cameras and DVDs.

But this "textualizing" attitude is not an invention of critics such as Aristotle and Longinus. It is seen in fifth-century writers contemporary with the heyday of classical theatre. One recalls that at the start of *Frogs* (52–54) Dionysus is depicted as reading a *text* of Euripides' *Andromeda*: this "textual" conception of drama is completely lost sight of in what follows (the *agon* resembles far more a conventional adjudication procedure, in which textual and verbal features are ignored in favor of political content). *Frogs* could indeed

98. Long. *De Subl.* 7.2–3; see further Russell 1964 *ad loc.*.

be read as a clash between purely “literary” and other types of judgment.⁹⁹ At any rate, it is perfectly clear that fifth-century dramatists—whatever view one takes of their competitive spirit—were familiar with texts and book-rolls, and so would not have conceived of their art as exclusively performative or impermanent.

Michael Silk makes a compelling case for seeing Aristophanes (in particular) as a *writer* first and a *dramatist* second, drawing attention to the comedian’s unusually “bookish” preoccupations and pointing out that Aristophanes preferred to write the book and let someone else direct the actual production.¹⁰⁰ But Aristophanes will not have been unique: it has often been suggested that other playwrights composed with a reading public specifically in mind. Certainly we know of several plays which were never performed but existed as texts.¹⁰¹ Whether these plays were *conceived of* as “texts” is a different matter; but it is obvious that some plays were not written for *competitive* performance: for example, those works commissioned by foreign tyrants (e.g. Aeschylus’ *Women of Aetna*, Euripides’ Macedonian dramas, and so on). Furthermore, such pieces show that artistic production and consumption took place in elite circles and (despite what is sometimes claimed) that drama was not necessarily or invariably linked to democratic or Athenian value systems.¹⁰²

Another important fifth-century writer in this respect is Thucydides. In his programmatic preface he describes his *Histories* as “a lasting possession for all time, rather than a competition-piece to suit the tastes of an immediate audience” (κτῆμα τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν, 1.22.4). The wording here is uncannily similar to Longinus 7.2, with its focus on the specific moment and the timescale of literary judgment. Two contrasting models of literary value—ἀγώνισμα and κτῆμα—are being juxtaposed. Thucydides is not rejecting drama itself (indeed, he is heavily influenced by drama in the texture of his own writing),¹⁰³ nor is he rejecting the principle of competition in so many words;¹⁰⁴ but he is rejecting, specifically, the “value” conferred on drama by prizes, in favor of a more genuine, lasting type of value. He sees his own work specifically as something that will endure (unlike dra-

99. See O’Sullivan 1992 and Pohlenz 1920. I shall return to this issue elsewhere (Wright forthcoming).

100. Silk 2000: 4–6 (citing *Knights* 515ff.); cf. MacDowell 1995: 34–41.

101. Unperformed plays include (e.g.) Nicophon’s *Sirens* and Metagenes’ *Thuriopians* (see Athenaeus 6.270a), but perhaps these were written, at least, with performance in mind. Cf. Menander’s *Imbrians* (*P.Oxy.* 1253), which was unperformed only because it was suppressed by the tyrant Lachares. Many authors *revised* earlier plays, but it is unlikely that they would be guaranteed a repeat performance: perhaps they circulated as books (e.g. Aristophanes’ revised *Clouds*?). Revermann 2006b: 326–32 provides up-to-date discussion of all these issues and cites much useful evidence.

102. On the perceived Athenocentrism of Greek drama, see (most recently) Rhodes 2003.

103. See Macleod 1983.

104. As Greenwood 2006: 21 points out, Thucydides’ claim that his work is *not* competitive is itself inherently competitive.

matic performances). Thucydides' conception of literature and its value is textual and monumental, "decontextualized and countercultural."¹⁰⁵ All of this is the direct opposite of the world of performances, festivals, instantaneous judgments, and prizes, which by their nature denote ephemeral and impermanent value only.

IV(D): THE CRITERIA FOR PRIZE WINNING ARE OPAQUE

In contrast to professional critics, who attempt to fix and describe objective criteria for good or bad literature, the prize-awarding judges seem to have operated according to criteria that were subjective and opaque. Consequently, we find no explicit mention of the qualities for which a prize was awarded, though critics might hint at a connection between certain qualities (or defects) and success in the competitions.¹⁰⁶ As we have already seen, when specific merits are mentioned, these tend to be directly *contrasted* with those qualities that win prizes (for instance, Aristotle's strictures about certain types of plotting). Plato, in a passage referred to earlier (*Laws* 2.658b-d), writes that "the whole premise is that he who best succeeds in giving us enjoyment and pleasure" should be awarded the prize; though, as we have seen, the question of what properly constitutes "pleasure" is hugely problematic.¹⁰⁷

The competing comedians sometimes give clues about the qualities which were seen as likely to win prizes, but these are not much more helpful. As mentioned earlier, "novelty" and "cleverness" (both rather vaguely defined) are mentioned approvingly, in comic parabases and elsewhere.¹⁰⁸ However, there is little trace elsewhere in the critical tradition of the view that novelty is a virtue, and "cleverness" is never mentioned at all (as such). Indeed, Longinus states that a striving for novelty is responsible for all *faults* in modern literature.¹⁰⁹ And, in any case, it is clear that audiences often failed to appreciate these qualities. Aristophanes seems to have thought that his comedy *Clouds*, which he presents as both "novel" and "clever," would win the prize in 423, but these qualities were in fact overlooked by his "vulgar" audience.¹¹⁰ It seems that Aristophanes' earlier victory in 426 was the first successful entry by a new poet for ten years: this fact might point to a certain conservatism on the part of the audience and

105. So Moles 2001: 206; cf. Greenwood 2006: 3–5.

106. E.g. Ar. *Poet.* 18.1456a (poets who put too much material in their plots are hissed off stage or do badly in the contest); *ibid.* 17.1455a (Carcinus failed to "visualize" the material in his plot properly and so failed; however, the point here is opaque: see Lucas 1968 ad loc.).

107. Elsewhere (*Rep.* 398a), Plato says that the most austere, *least* pleasing poet should be preferred.

108. Cf. note 58 above.

109. Long. *De Subl.* 5.1; cf. Sen. *Epis.* 114.10. Already in Homer one finds a similar view, when Telemachus criticizes the audiences of rhapsodes for always applauding the newest (νεωτάτη) song (*Od.* 1.346–55, discussed recently by Ledbetter 2003: 34–39). However, the issue of "novelty" in *comedy* specifically is extremely problematic (see Wright forthcoming).

110. See Ar. *Clouds* 525 ff. (the *parabasis* of the revised version) with Dover 1968 ad loc.

judges.¹¹¹ One might also compare the mixed reception of the “New Music” in the last decades of the fifth century: this radically new style of performance, with its metrical and tonal innovations, seems to have divided theatre audiences hugely.¹¹²

A fragment of the fourth-century comedy *Dithyramb*, by Amphis, shows that music might at other times play a part in the decision to award a prize.¹¹³ Here two speakers are discussing a musical innovation called *gingras* (a new type of woodwind instrument, according to Athenaeus, who quotes the passage):

A. ἐγὼ δὲ τὸν γίγγραν γε τὸν σοφώτατον.
 B. τίς δ' ἔσθ' ὁ γίγγρας; A. καινὸν ἐξεύρημά τι
 ἡμέτερον, ὃ θεάτρῳ μὲν οὐδεπώποτε
 ἔδειξ', Ἀθήνησιν δὲ κατακεχρημένον
 ἐν συμποσίοις ἤδη 'στί. B. διὰ τί δ' οὐκ ἄγεις
 εἰς τὸν ὄχλον αὐτό; A. διότι φυλὴν περιμένω
 σφόδρα φιλονικοῦσαν λαχεῖν τιν'· οἶδα γὰρ
 ὅτι πάντα πράγματ' ἀνατριαινῶσει κρότοις.

Amphis *Dithyramb* fr. 14 K-A

A: [I'm going to use] the *gingras*, an *extremely* clever thing.

B: What's the *gingras*?

A: A new invention of my own: I haven't yet revealed it to the theatre audience, but it is already all the rage at symposia in Athens.

B: But why don't you bring it out in front of the public?

A: Because I've been waiting until I'm allotted a tribe that is really eager for victory. I know it will shake up everything, like a trident, with all the applause it gets.¹¹⁴

This tantalizingly short passage exhibits three significant recurrent motifs which we have already seen. First, it illustrates the direct link between the audience's response and the success of a work (whatever the official judging procedure was): the volume of the audience's applause implies a likely victory. Second, novelty is again seen as a possible criterion for success. Third, cleverness is an additional criterion, linked to novelty (whether it actually worked or not).

The fragment has some other points of considerable interest. It implies (as does Longinus, for example) that the competitive spirit could be seen as

111. So Storey 2003: 62–65, citing *IG* II².2325. In general (in the modern world, at least), it is rare for first-time authors to win prizes, though it is scarcely the case that more experienced authors invariably produce better work.

112. On the controversies arising from the “New Music” in late fifth-century Athens, see West 1992: 356–72; Csapo 2004. Timotheus, one of the most notable practitioners of this style, is discussed by Phillips 2003, who argues (perhaps controversially) that Timotheus' musical innovations made him unpopular with many Athenians, until the gung-ho anti-oriental sentiment of *Persians* won them over: see Satyrus *Vita Eur.* fr. 39, col. xxii; cf. Plut. *Ages.* 14; Paus. 8.50.3.

113. “Novelty” is connected to prize winning in connection with music at Eupolis fr. 392 and [Plut.] *de Musica* 1135c (though the precise meaning is obscure in each case).

114. Amphis *Dithyramb* fr. 14 K-A (= Athenaeus 4.174f).

a stimulus towards new developments and artistic excellence. For Amphis' characters, innovation is directly linked to the desire for a prize: the speaker here, a dithyrambic poet, is saving up his new instrumental effects for an occasion when his *phyle* is particularly keen to win the competition. Perhaps this is not very surprising; but what is rather more interesting is that the innovation in question would *already* have been familiar to some of the more privileged audience members. The inventor of the *gingras* tells his interlocutor that his instrument is already part of aristocratic high culture—it is well liked by the guests at private *soirées*—even though it has not yet entered the public domain.

This contrast between elite and popular culture is very telling. As one scholar points out, what we are seeing here is “dithyrambic poets bringing tit-bits from the cultural riches of the upper-class private world of pleasure into the public world of the mob in the interests of their own victory.”¹¹⁵ In addition, this evidence has important implications about the creative process and the circulation of cultural value. Genuine cultural activity and true appreciation—the genesis and consumption of works of art, literature, and music—are seen as going on in the “field of restricted production,” quite independently of the public, institutionalized prize-winning circuit. Those who actually produce works of art, literature, and music are part of the elite sphere, and will continue to produce art, whether or not it wins prizes.¹¹⁶ Their “ideal” audience is thus potentially much smaller, and more discerning, than the masses who fill the theatres at the festivals.

All of this, if true, provides support for the view, advanced above, that victory or defeat in the competitions might have been a matter of selective or comparative indifference to the poets themselves, nearly all of whom, inevitably, would have belonged to the aristocratic class in society. The really important factor is, as has already been stated, that prizes from the fifth century onwards were state-controlled. The democratic appropriation and transformation of an essentially aristocratic sphere of activity changed the way in which cultural “value” was publicly conferred, but the artworks continued to be produced, just as before, largely by the elite in society, who could afford either to ignore or to acknowledge the supposed “value” of prizes. Art and literature exist, and are perpetuated, irrespective of politics and prizes; prizes are therefore irrelevant.

IV(E): PRIZES ARE UNCONNECTED TO “CLASSIC” STATUS

There is another sense in which prizes are irrelevant to critics. That is, the best authors are sometimes thought to possess an inalienable status as “classics,” whether they win or lose: they are somehow immune to success or failure, and

115. Wilson 2000: 70.

116. Furthermore, this ties in with Pritchard's (2004) calculation that the elite classes could provide all the participants (actors, dancers, musicians, and others) in post-Cleisthenic festivals; however, contrast the view of Revermann 2006a.

their superior status is presented as being so obvious that it does not even require demonstration or further discussion.

In this respect, it is worth noting that prizes (won or lost) had no discernible effect on the reception, survival, or lasting prestige of any ancient play. The plays that were talked about and reperformed during classical and later antiquity, and the plays that were transmitted as texts, were not necessarily the first prize winners.¹¹⁷ Occasionally, of course, there is a degree of correspondence between prize-winning success and a writer's enduring status: Sophocles, who was placed first a remarkable eighteen times, retained "classic" status in later years.¹¹⁸ But this was not always the case: Euripides, the "most tragic" tragedian (according to Aristotle) and the most popular in later antiquity, notoriously won only five first prizes (one of them posthumous).¹¹⁹

P. T. Stevens, in a classic article, attempted to play down Euripides' lack of success by suggesting that the award of second or third prize did not constitute "failure," and to be awarded a chorus at all was what counted.¹²⁰ As I have already suggested, this must be true to a certain extent; but I think that Stevens, in his attempt to rehabilitate Euripides' reputation, slightly misses the point. Victory might not have been important to the playwright himself, but the Athenians on the whole, and subsequent readers and critics, clearly *did* perceive a difference between winning and coming second or third. What is significant about Euripides' reputation is precisely this perceived mismatch between quality and success: we need to acknowledge the discrepancy rather than trying to explain it away.

The ancient tradition surrounding Euripides is based entirely on the perception that he was unpopular and unsuccessful. As already mentioned, the entire plot of *Frogs* can be seen as springing from the premise that Euripides so often unaccountably loses competitions, despite being the better poet and the "obvious" choice. Many years later, the ancient biographers of Euripides record that the poet was hated by his contemporary audiences, but imply that they were wrong to hate him—since to explain his unpopularity they have to dredge up dubious anecdotes about the poet's personality and sex life (while the quality of his plays is simply taken for granted).¹²¹ Nevertheless, Euripides' status as a "classic" author persisted (and still persists today), irrespective of his prize-winning record.

Euripides is not the only author to whom this observation applies. A recurrent feature in the critical tradition is the implicit award of "classic" status to certain authors: this takes the form of a generalized approval or admiration that refers to the author's reputation or career *as a whole* rather than any individual works. Whenever the results of *specific* competitions are mentioned, we are (as usual)

117. See Garland 2004.

118. See Section III above.

119. See Kovacs 1994: 38–49.

120. Stevens 1956: 91–92.

121. Kovacs 1994 conveniently collects and translates all relevant material. For discussion see Kovacs 1990: 14–22 and Lefkowitz 1981.

never told the grounds for the decision, or the reasons why the outcome was just or unjust, but we have to take it as self-evidently true that the “classic” author ought to have won, rather than his lesser-known or less admired rival. Even in his own day, Sophocles’ reputation was such that his occasional lack of success could provoke outrage: when the obscure Gnesippus was awarded a chorus ahead of Sophocles, the comedian Cratinus made a joke out of the scandal, saying that Gnesippus was unfit to put on a play even at the minor festival of the Adonia.¹²² The joke relies on the supposed fact that some authors are just naturally “better” than others. We might compare Aulus Gellius’ surprise at the fact that the famous Menander was repeatedly beaten by the “inferior” poet Philemon (he implies that undue influence from Philemon’s supporters must have been the cause),¹²³ or Quintilian’s statement that Menander was often defeated in the “corrupt” judgments of his day.¹²⁴ All of these opinions are based either explicitly or implicitly on an established “pecking order” of poets that the reader is expected to know and accept. The plays in question—which are not even discussed—are assumed to be self-evidently superior (in some, unspecified sense), so that the judges’ verdicts are inexplicable according to any normal standards.

The *Suda* records that the little-known Nicomachus “astonishingly” (παρὰ-δόξωζ) defeated Euripides on one occasion, but the author does not spell out the reason why this award was so astonishing.¹²⁵ The reader is required to share the assumption that Euripides, the “classic” author, is obviously greater than Nicomachus. But, as in the examples above, we are also required to make the assumption that every single play of the “classic” author is better than every single play of the “non-classic” rival. This is unreasonable, given that all authors over the course of their careers are bound to produce works that are (judged by some criteria) variable in quality; it ignores the possibility that Nicomachus might have had a surprise “hit” or Euripides an unexpected “off” day. As elsewhere, however, the respective merits or defects of the competing plays are ignored.

A similar anecdote is recorded by Aelian,¹²⁶ who writes that in 415 Euripides, competing with the “Trojan” tetralogy *Alexandros*, *Palamedes*, *Trojan Women*, and *Sisyphus*, was defeated by Xenocles, “whoever he is.” We do not know the grounds on which the decision was made, and we do not have Xenocles’ offering (*Oedipus*, *Lycaon*, *Bacchae*, and *Athamas*) to compare it with those portions of the Euripidean tetralogy to have survived. But here, once again, the

122. Cratinus *Cowherd* fr. 17 K-A. Note that certain festivals or prizes seem to have been more prestigious than others: this could potentially complicate our argument, but there is not enough evidence to pursue this line of discussion. Was the Dionysia more important than the Lenaea? So Storey 2003: 81 and others, but contrast Rosen 1989: Plato *Comicus* fr. 590 K-A may be relevant.

123. Aul. Gell. *NA* 17.4.

124. Quint. *Inst. Or.* 10.1.72.

125. *Suda* s.v. “Nicomachus” (ν 397) = Nicomachus *TrGF* 36 T1. (The text is corrupt: the name of Theognis intrudes, confusingly.)

126. Aelian *VH* 2.18.

point seems to be that Xenocles, as a lesser-known poet whose works were not widely read in Aelian's time, ought not to have defeated the "classic" Euripides. Xenocles does not merit consideration at all—he is dismissed with the withering phrase ὅστις ποτὲ οὗτός ἐστιν—and Aelian reinforces the point by describing the judges' verdict as both "ludicrous" (γελοῖον) and "bizarre" (ἄτοπον). We can only assume, he says, that they were idiots lacking in proper judgment, or that they were bribed. While, as in the other examples above, the underlying assumption is that "classic" authors are *invariably* better than "non-classics," Aelian does go a little further, stating that the outcome of the contest was particularly unfair, given that the playwrights were competing "with plays of such quality" (καὶ ταῦτα τοιούτοις δράμασι). But it remains unclear whether Xenocles' plays were particularly bad or Euripides' particularly good, and what (in either case) might constitute goodness or badness. It would be interesting to know how much of this anecdote is Aelian's own invention—that is, whether it represents fifth-century opinion or some subsequent judgment, or whether it represents Aelian's own extrapolation from the bare performance record as found in a *hypothesis* or the *didaskaliai*.

What links together the material in this final section is the lack of explanation offered for critical judgments and the number of illogical assumptions made by its writers. Perhaps this motley collection of ancient commentators and biographers represents the low-grade end of the spectrum of critical writings, but these writers doubtless reflect the agglomerated views of generations of critics and readers. Admittedly, one is no closer to discovering the criteria for which prizes were awarded. Nevertheless, it is useful to have a clear signal of an outlook that underlies much (modern as well as ancient) criticism: that an author's overall status, and his *oeuvre* as a whole, is a consideration somehow separable from (though overlapping with) that of the quality of specific individual works.

V. CONCLUSION

It is hard to find anyone of stature in the world of arts and letters who speaks with unalloyed respect for prizes, and still more difficult to find books or articles...that do not strike the familiar chords of amused indifference, jocular condescension, or outright disgust.¹²⁷

Literary and cultural prizes operate within contemporary discourse precisely by stimulating an irreconcilable mixture of "pro-" and "anti-prize" views, which in turn reflect unresolved contests in status between everyone who participates in the debate. It is clear that the overwhelming mass of ancient literary criticism, for all its diversity, exhibits a predominantly devaluing, "anti-prize" mentality. As I have been careful to stress, these critics are not opposed in principle to the

127. English 2005: 187.

hierarchical ranking and adjudication of literature, but rather to the organization of the competitions, the identity and nature of the “consecrators,” the underlying values on which the prizes are based, or (perhaps most of all) to the fact that these underlying values are never made absolutely transparent. All the views above represent statements of a clash between value systems that vary quite widely in type and that often remain unspoken, as does the “value” conferred by the prizes themselves. Social, political, and philosophical as well as “purely” literary values are juxtaposed, often confusingly. It will be clear by now that the “anti-prize” mentality, whatever else it may be, remains inherently *competitive* in spirit.

It seems to me that the “anti-prize” mentality corresponds closely in many respects to Bourdieu’s view of the “autonomization” of art, and that the uneasy tension within ancient society between “pro-prize” and “anti-prize” views, or between elite and mass values, can be seen as directly reflecting what Bourdieu calls the “duality” of the field of cultural production. Though Bourdieu himself would perhaps have doubted the applicability of his theories to a classical context, the ancient evidence does lend itself remarkably well to a Bourdieu-style analysis; and it does seem that, despite obvious contextual differences, there is indeed a cross-cultural consistency in the way that literary prizes function within society and critical discourse. The quotation at the head of this section (from English’s *Economy of Prestige*) refers to the modern media and cultural prizes in AD 2005, but it might apply equally well to our ancient material.

One important similarity between Bourdieu’s approach and my own is that they both seek to explain long-lasting transformations in cultural values as arising from specific periods of change within society.¹²⁸ The same could also be said, essentially, of the picture painted by Ford in *The Origins of Criticism*.¹²⁹ It just depends on one’s identification of the crucial period of time in question and the specific factors operating within this period. Whereas the invention of a distinctly “literary-critical” attitude is seen by Ford as resulting from the intellectual developments of fourth-century Greece, it seems to me much more plausible that the crucial time and place was fifth-century Athens. This was not only a period of unusual social, intellectual and political change in general, but also, more importantly, it was the period which saw the Athenians’ remarkable transformation of an existing agonistic literary culture into a fully *institutionalized* system, administered and “owned” by the newly democratic city-state.

Even though subsequent classical contexts were not “prize-awarding” cultures in the same way, or to the same degree, as fifth-century Athens,¹³⁰ it seems clear

128. Cf. the approach of Marxist criticism, which sees aesthetic ideas as arising out of specific social and political conditions: Eagleton 1990 provides a useful discussion and critique of the relationship between aesthetics and political ideology (from Kant onwards).

129. Ford 2002: 4 (with n. 8) acknowledges the influence of Bourdieu in his own work, though he does not refer to his theories explicitly.

130. On changes to the Athenian festivals in the later classical and Hellenistic period, see Easterling 1997 and Le Guen 1995. Another date of major importance is 386 BC, at which the

that this highly distinctive era of Athenian competitions transformed the way in which classical writers in general thought about prizes (just as for Bourdieu the Industrial Revolution in Europe led to the permanent creation of the “modern” cultural field). The “anti-prize” mentality does not manifest itself in precisely the same way in each of the texts above—it is always important to bear in mind the specific circumstances of genre, audience, and context when reading each different author’s views—but the basic intellectual framework of élite versus mass culture pervades the whole tradition.

The discussion above has, I think, a couple of important consequences for our understanding of the meaning and development of “ancient literary criticism” as a discipline. The first is that “literary criticism” can be treated as being a more inclusive genre (in terms of date, background, and type of writer) than is sometimes supposed. On my reading of the evidence, the writers traditionally labeled “ancient literary critics” (such as Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, and others) are not seen as doing something new or separate: it seems more likely that they are continuing and refining the terms of a debate that had already been going on for some time.¹³¹ Secondly, it is worth re-evaluating the place of fifth-century comedy, in particular, within the development of “literary criticism.” Of course, there remain serious difficulties of evidence and interpretation. What did the competing dramatists actually think about prizes for which they competed, and what views of literature were current in popular discourse generally at the time in question? These are the facts which we most crucially need to know, but they are also the most inaccessible to us. I have suggested an approach to comic texts that attempts to answer some of these questions, but that may strike some readers as implausible. (Was winning or losing really not a matter of primary importance to the ancient dramatists?) Nevertheless, in the absence of definitive evidence, it is worth considering not just the widely accepted, “obvious” or “commonsensical” view of things, but a range of possible interpretations—a type of approach always worth bearing in mind when dealing with the ancient world.

To pursue these consequences fully would require a much more extensive study (of which this article represents just a preliminary stage). But, in the meantime, one could conclude by noting that the “anti-prize” mentality does not seem to have had a damaging effect on prize culture itself. It might even be said that prizes actually gain in value by being endlessly contested and debated in public. This is certainly true of modern prize-culture, in which disagreements with the judges’ decisions have been seen as not only inevitable but actually necessary for

festival was rearranged to allow revivals of old plays (see *TrGF* I DID A I 201; cf. Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 91–93). Roman literary culture and theatrical performances were not based on institutionalized competition: for discussion of Roman writers, audiences, and literary consumption in general see Bernstein 1998; Blänsdorf 1990.

131. Cf. O’Sullivan 1992; Pohlenz 1920.

the perpetuation of the system.¹³² “Anti-prize” views increase people’s perception of the prizes’ importance—for who would bother to contest the awards unless they mattered in some way? In addition, “anti-prize” opinions also have the effect of stimulating public debate about literary value. To quote another modern commentator, the function of the Booker Prize is “not simply to promote the cause of serious fiction. . . [but] to provoke rows and scandals, which may, in due course, promote the cause of serious fiction.”¹³³ Once again, this observation may apply equally well to the ancient festivals (substituting “drama” for “fiction”). Nobody, after all, is ever going to agree on such a thing as *absolute* value in literature or in any other area of life—and why should we desire such an outcome? Literary prizes represented—and still represent—a stimulus for critical discussion, not a critical consensus.

University of Exeter
m.wright@ex.ac.uk

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132. So Todd 1996, writing about the modern Booker Prize, which (he argues) thrives “precisely by getting it wrong.”

133. Mark Lawson in the London *Independent* (6 September 1994). As if to illustrate this claim, an official pamphlet issued by the prize organizers, *The Man Booker Prize: 35 Years of the Best in Contemporary Fiction* (London, 2003), devotes a lengthy section (“Hitting the Headlines”) to such scandals.

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