

**A HISTORY OF CLASSICAL
GREEK
LITERATURE, VOL. I, PART
II, THE DRAMATIC POETS**

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A history of classical Greek literature, Vol. I, Part II, The dramatic poets by J. P. Mahaffy

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J. P. MAHAFFY

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II, THE DRAMATIC POETS**

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A HISTORY
OF
CLASSICAL GREEK LITERATURE

BY THE
REV. J. P. MAHAFFY, M.A.

KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF THE REDEEMER
FELLOW AND PROF. OF ANCIENT HISTORY, TRIN. COLL. DUBLIN
HON. FELLOW OF QUEEN'S COLL. OXFORD
AUTHOR OF 'SOCIAL LIFE IN GREECE' 'GREEK LIFE AND THOUGHT'
'THE GREEK WORLD UNDER ROMAN SWAY' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I. PART II.

THE DRAMATIC POETS

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Ἄλλὰ γὰρ οὐκ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις χρῆ ταύτοις τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων
ζητεῖν τὰς καιρότητας, ἐν οἷς οὔτε παράδοξον οὐτ' ἄπιστον οὐτ'
ἔξω τῶν νομιζομένων οὐδὲν ἔξεστιν εἰπεῖν, ἀλλ' ἠγειῖσθαι τοῦτον
χαρίστατον, ὅς ἂν τῶν δισπαρμένων ἐν ταῖς τῶν ἄλλων διανοίαις
ἀθροῖσαι τὰ πλεῖστα δυναθῆ καὶ φράσαι κάλλιστα περὶ αὐτῶν.

ISOCRATES.

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HISTORY OF GREEK LITERATURE.

PART II.

CHAPTER XIV.

DRAMATIC TENDENCIES IN THE SIXTH CENTURY. THE RISE
OF TRAGEDY AND SATYRIC DRAMA. THE EXTERNAL
APPLIANCES OF GREEK PLAYS.

§ 160. WE have now reviewed a long series of Epic and Lyric poems, all of which originated in Asia Minor, and from there passed into Greece and westward. The development of the *Æolic* and *Ionic* colonies—if colonies they can be called—had been more rapid than that of the motherland. But the *Ionic* literature had also taken quick root and flourished in the old country. It was probably to Solon or to Peisistratus that we owe the ordering and systematising of the *epos*. The elegy found its Hellenic representatives in Solon, in Theognis and Tyrteus; the choral poetry of Terpander and of Arion made its home not only in Peloponnesus, but with Stesichorus in Sicily, where the rarity of Homeric recitations left it open to the poet to bring the old myths into his choral songs, and give the people what the rhapsodists had elsewhere supplied. It was, in fact, the *Æolic* songs of Lesbos only that bloomed and faded on their own soil, without wafting their seed across the *Ægean* to take root and flourish in older Greece. But the personal outpourings of anger, of sorrow, of

wisdom, of experience, which the Ionian elegist and iambist had substituted for the calm of old epic recitation; the common choric song in honour of the gods, with its accompaniments of music and dancing—these had found their way to Greece, and had soon passed on into peculiar developments. The chorus of Alcman, the Lydian Greek, had learned to speak *the poet's sentiments* to his hearers, and so to mediate between the personality of the elegy and the impersonality of the choral hymn. The chorus of Stesichorus had learned to introduce *the national legends* with a new dress and a lyric treatment, and so long as these legends were alive and growing in Greek hearts, they were the sheet anchor of Greek poetry the Atlas whereon the whole world of its literature found a sure support in all its gyrations.

Both these un-Ionic features are found in the highly developed and perfectly finished lyrics of Pindar. The myth is now an integral part of the choric hymn; so is also the word of the poet as a master of wisdom addressing the people through his chorus. But as calm critics have remarked, the occasion of these remarkable poems was not high enough, or the subjects worthy enough, for the splendour of their art. They celebrated local, often trivial, victories; they praised professional trainers, and obscure ancestors, often, we may suspect, by means of invented genealogies. And, in any case, they were the poetry of the aristocracy, and not of the people. This art was consequently also professional, composed and performed for patrons and for pay, offered to the gods, not by the people themselves, but for them, at the hands of singers by trade. These facts agree with the non-patriotic attitude of Pindar, on which I have commented in its place.¹

The rising democracy of Athens would naturally demand some very different worship, some very different festivals, from those of the old aristocracies. The people who now took part in politics must also take an active part in public religion and its festivals.² And for this the first suggestion, as in so many

¹ § 149.

² Wilamowitz, *Herakles*, i. p. 77, quotes the *Polity of the Athenians* to show how the Demos abolished professional performances of choral music, and undertook this duty itself. This tract, as is well agreed, is not

other directions, had been given by Peisistratus. With the intention of raising the people and their life to a higher level, while he depressed the aristocrats, he had favoured and promoted the worship of Dionysus, hitherto a rustic religion beyond the pale of the epic Pantheon, but fascinating the old Greeks, as Oriental orgies and cults long afterwards fascinated the effete world of Plutarch, with its violent emotions and engrossing mysteries. This worship of Dionysus was no doubt diffused through the northern Peloponnesus. We hear of Arion naturalising the dithyramb at Corinth, in which the sorrows and escapes of Dionysus were sung by his chorus.

But it is more than doubtful¹ that the dithyrambs of Attica were the real ancestors of any poetry but that of the fourth century, known under the same name. Dithyrambs were in vogue all through classical Athenian literature, but perhaps more eminently so before and after the bloom of tragedy. This latter had, then, its origin in some other choral poetry which came in with the worship of Dionysus from Doric neighbours. Among these we know of one whose name gives us the clue—the *goat* choruses, in which the singers, with that peculiar desire of escaping from themselves into some wild disguise—a desire as universal as civilisation—assumed the mummery of satyrs, and thus posing as personal companions of the God, entered with an intenser sympathy into the story of his anthropomorphic adventures. These choruses seem not to have been professional, or even strolling, as the early mention of a tent for their background would suggest, but rather village choruses, prepared for the vintage feasts of the god.

We shall turn presently to the names of the earliest inventors of tragedy, and the few facts known about them, but it may be well here to say a few words upon the peculiarities of the Attic drama. It has been shown with great ability by Von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, in the book cited, that the celebrated definition of tragedy which Aristotle lays down and expounds in his *Poetic*, however applicable to tragedy generally, however applicable it might have been to the tragedies of

by Xenophon, but by some earlier aristocratic author writing in the days and in the temper of Alcibiades. Cf. vol. ii. of this work, § 476.

¹ Cf. the whole argument in Wilamowitz, *Herakles*, i. pp. 78-80.