

Aspects of Ancient Greek Drama

Drama

While ancient Greek drama appears first during the sixth century BC and can be traced well down into the third, most attention is paid to the fifth century at Athens, when and where most of the nearly fifty plays that we possess were produced. In this study we shall introduce the three distinct genres of Greek drama: serious drama or tragedy (traditionally instituted in 534), **satyr-drama** (added ca. 500), and comedy (formally introduced at Athens in the 480s, but which flourished at the same time in **Syracuse**).

Drama is action. According to **Aristotle** (*Poetics* 1448a28) dramatic poets “represent people in action,” as opposed to a purely third-person narrative or the mixture of narrative and direct speech as found in **Homer**. We begin appropriately with the Greek word δράμα (*drāma*), which means “action” or “doing.” Aristotle adds that the verb *drān* was not an **Attic** word (“Attic” being the Greek dialect spoken at Athens), Athenians preferring to use the verb *prattein* and its cognates (*pragma*, *praxis*) to signify “action.” Whether this was true or not does not matter here – that *drān* is common in Athenian tragedy, but not in the prose writers, may support Aristotle’s assertion. Both **Plato** and Aristotle, the two great philosophers of the fourth century, defined drama as a *mimēsis*, “imitation” or “representation,” but each took a different view of the matter. *Mimēsis* is not an easy word to render in English, since neither “imitation” nor “representation” really hits the mark. We have left it in Greek transliteration. For Plato *mimēsis* was something disreputable, something inferior, something the ideal ruler of his ideal state would avoid. It meant putting oneself into the character of another, taking on another’s role, which in many Greek myths could be a morally inferior one, perhaps that of a slave or a woman. Plato would have agreed with Polonius in *Hamlet*, “to thine own self be true.” But Aristotle considered *mimēsis*

not only as something natural in human nature but also as something that was a pleasure and essential for human learning (*Poetics* 1448b4–8): “to engage in *mimēsis* is innate in human beings from childhood and humans differ from other living creatures in that humans are very mimetic and develop their first learning through *mimēsis* and because all humans enjoy mimetic activities.”

Drama is “doing” or “performing,” and performances function in different ways in human cultures. Religion and ritual immediately spring to mind as one context: the elaborate dances of the Shakers; the complex rituals of the Navajo peoples; the mediaeval mystery plays, which for a largely illiterate society could provide both religious instruction and ritual re-enactment as well as entertainment. Drama can also encompass “science” – the dances of the Navajo provide both a history of the creation of the world and a series of elaborate healing rituals. Dramatic performances can keep the memory of historical figures and events alive. Greek tragedy falls partly into this category, since its themes and subjects are mainly drawn from an idealized heroic age several hundred years in the past. Some of the subjects of Greek tragedy are better described as “legendary” rather than “mythical,” for legend is based on historical events, elaborated admittedly out of recognition, but real nonetheless. The Ramlila play cycles of northern India were a similar mixture of myth and history, and provided for the Hindus the same sort of cultural heritage that Greek myths did for classical Greece. An extreme example are the history-plays of Shakespeare, in particular his *Richard III*, which was inspired by the Tudor propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting the last of the Plantagenets. Finally humans enjoy both acting in and watching performances. Aristotle was right to insist that *mimēsis* is both innate to humanity and the source of natural pleasure. We watch plays because they give us the pleasure of watching a story-line unfold, an engagement with the characters, and a satisfying emotional experience.

Another crucial term is “theater.” *Thea-* in Greek means “observe,” “watch,” and while we tend to speak of an “audience” and an “auditorium” (from the Latin *audire*, “to hear”), the ancients talked of “spectators,” and the “watching-place.” The noun *theatron* (“theater”) refers both to the physical area where the plays were staged, more specifically to the area on the hillside occupied by the spectators, and also to the spectators themselves, much as “house” today can refer to the theater building and to the audience in that building. Comedians were fond of breaking the dramatic illusion and often refer openly to *theatai* (“watchers”) or *theōmenoi* (“those watching”).

Modern academic discussions make a distinction between the study of “drama” and “theater.” A university course or a textbook on “drama” tends to concentrate more on the words of the text that is performed or read. Dramatic critics approach the plays as literature and subject them to various sorts of literary theory, and often run the risk of losing the visual aspect of performance in an attempt to “understand” or elucidate the “meaning” of the text. The reader becomes as important as the watcher, if not more so. Greek drama slips easily into a course on ancient literature or world drama, in which similar principles of literary criticism can be applied to all such texts.

But the modern study of “theater” goes beyond the basic text as staged or read and has developed a complex theoretical approach that some text-based students find daunting and at times impenetrable. Fortier writes well here:

Theater is performance, though often the performance of a dramatic text, and entails not only words but space, actors, props, audience, and the complex relations . . . Theater, of necessity, involves both doing and seeing, practice and contemplation. Moreover, the word “theory” comes from the same root as “theater.” Theater and theory are both contemplative pursuits, although theater has a practical and a sensuous side which contemplation should not be allowed to overwhelm.*

The study of “theater” will concern itself with the experience of producing and watching drama, before, during, and after the actual performance of the text itself. Theatrical critics want to know about the social assumptions and experiences of organizers, authors, performers, judges, and spectators. In classical Athens plays were performed on a public occasion, supported from the state treasury, in a theater placed next to the shrine of a god and as part of a festival of that god, in broad daylight where spectators would be conscious of far more than the performance unfolding below – of the city and country around them and of their own existence as spectators.

Ours is meant to be a guide to Greek *drama*, rather than to Greek *theater*. Our principal concern will be the texts themselves and their authors and, although such an approach may be somewhat out of date, the intentions of the authors themselves. But we do not want to lose sight of the practical elements that Fortier speaks of, especially the visual spectacle that accompanied the enactment of the recited text, for a picture is worth a thousand words, and if we could witness an ancient production, we would learn incalculably more about what the author was doing and how this was received by his original “house.” Knowing the conventions of the ancient theater assists also with understanding why certain scenes are written the way they are, why characters must leave and enter when they do, why crucial events are narrated rather than depicted.

Drama and the poets

Homer (eighth century) stands not just at the beginning of Greek poetry, but of Western literature as we know it. His two heroic epics, *Iliad* (about Achilles, the Greek hero of the Trojan War) and *Odyssey* (the return of Odysseus [Ulysses] from that war), did much to establish the familiar versions of the myths about both gods and men. Homer is the great poet of classical Greece, and his epics, along with what we call the “epic cycle” – lost poems, certainly later than Homer, that completed the story of the Trojan War, as well as another epic cycle relating the events at Thebes – formed the backdrop to so much later Greek literature, especially for the dramatists. Much of the plots, characters, and language come from Homer – **Aeschylus** is described as serving up “slices from the banquet of Homer” – and the dramatic critic needs always to keep one eye on Homer, to see what use the poets are making of his seminal material. For example, Homer created a brilliantly whole and appealing, if somewhat unconventional, character in his Odysseus, but for the dramatists of the fifth century

* M. Fortier, *Theatre/Theory* (London, Routledge: 1997), 4–6.

Odysseus becomes a one-sided figure: the paragon of clever talk and deceit, the evil counselor, and in one instance (**Sophokles'** *Ajax*) the embodiment of a new and enlightened sort of heroism. Homer's Achilles is one of the great examples of the truly "tragic" hero, a man whose pursuit of honor causes the death of his dearest friend and ultimately his own doom, but when he appears in **Euripides'** *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, we see an ineffectual youth, full of sound and fury, and unable to rescue the damsel in distress.

Of the surviving thirty-three plays attributed to the tragedians, only two dramatize material from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Euripides' satyr-drama *Cyclops* [*Odyssey* 9] and *Rhesos* of doubtful authenticity [*Iliad* 10]), but we do know of several lost plays that also used Homeric material. Homer may be three centuries earlier than the tragedians of the fifth century, but his influence upon them was crucial. Homer himself was looking back to an earlier age, what we call the late Bronze Age (1500–1100), a tradition which he passed on to the dramatists. Both Homer and the tragedians are depicting people and stories not of their own time, but of an earlier idealized age of heroes.

In the seventh and sixth centuries heroic epic began to yield to choral poetry (often called "lyric," from its accompaniment by the lyre). These were poems intended to be sung, usually by large choruses in a public setting. Particularly important for the study of drama are the grand poets Stesichoros (ca. 600), Bacchylides (career: 510–450), and Pindar (career: 498–440s), who took the traditional tales from myth and epic and retold them in smaller portions, consciously reworking the material that they had inherited. They used a different meter from Homer, not the epic hexameter chanted by a single bard, but elaborate "lyric" meters, sung by large choruses. No work by Stesichoros has survived intact, but we know he wrote poem on the Theban story, one of tragedy's favorite themes; an *Oresteia*, containing significant points of contact with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; and a version of the story of Helen that Euripides will take up wholesale in his *Helen*. Poem 16 by Bacchylides tells the story of Herakles' death at the hands of his wife, much as Sophokles dramatizes the story in his *Trachinian Women*, and it is not clear whether Bacchylides' poem or Sophokles' tragedy is the earlier work. Pindar in *Pythian* 11 (474) will anticipate Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458) by presenting Klytimestra's various motives for killing her husband.

Why Athens?

Most, if not all, of the plays we have were originally written and performed at Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries. Thus much of our study will be centered upon Athens, although theaters and dramatic performances were not exclusive to Athens. Argos had a reasonably sized theater in the fifth century, while at Syracuse, the greatest of the Greek states in the West, there was an elaborate theater and a tradition of comedy by the early fifth century. But it was at Athens in the late sixth and early fifth centuries that the three genres of drama were formalized as public competitions. Traditionally the first official performance of tragedy is credited to **Thespis** in 534, but as the records of the dramatic performances appear to begin around 501, many prefer to date the

actual beginning of tragedy (and thus of Greek drama) to that later date. But whatever date one chooses (see the next chapter), one must understand the political and social background of Athens, both in the sixth century and in the high classical age of democracy.

In the sixth century Athens was not yet the leading city of the Greek world, politically, militarily, economically, or culturally, that she would become in the fifth century. The principal states of the sixth century in the Greek homeland were Sparta, Corinth, Sikyon, and Samos, and some ancient sources do record some sort of dramatic performances at Corinth and Sikyon earlier in the sixth century. Athens was an important city, but not in the same league as these others. By the early sixth century Athens had brought under her central control the region called “Attica” (map 1.1). This is a triangular peninsula roughly forty miles in length from the height of land that divides Attica from Boiotia (dominated by Thebes) to the south-eastern tip of Cape Sounion, and at its widest expanse about another forty miles. Athens itself lies roughly in the center, no more than thirty miles or so from any outlying point – the most famous distance is that from Athens to Marathon, just over twenty-six miles, covered by the runner announcing the victory at Marathon in 490 and thus the length of the modern marathon race. Attica itself was not particularly rich agriculturally – the only substantial plains lie around Athens itself and at Marathon – nor does it supply good grazing for cattle or sheep. But in the late sixth century Athens underwent an economic boom through the discovery and utilization of three products of the Attic soil: olives and olive oil, which rapidly became the best in the eastern Mediterranean; clay for pottery – Athenian vase-ware soon replaced Corinthian as the finest of the day; and silver from the mines at Laureion – the Athenian “owls” became a standard coinage of the eastern Mediterranean.

Coupled with this economic advance were the political developments of the late sixth century. The Greek cities of the seventh and sixth centuries experienced an uneasy mix of hereditary monarchy, factional aristocracy, popular unrest (at Athens especially over debts and the loss of personal freedom), and “tyranny.” To us “tyranny” is a pejorative term, like “dictatorship,” but in Archaic Greece it meant “one-man-rule,” usually where that one man had made himself ruler, sometimes rescuing a state from an internal *stasis* (“civil strife”). Various lists of the seven wise men of ancient Greece include as many as four **tyrants**. At Athens the tyrant Peisistratos seized power permanently in the mid 540s following a period of internal instability and ruled to his death in 528/7. He was succeeded by his son Hippias, who was expelled from Athens in 510 by an alliance of exiled aristocrats, the Delphic oracle, and the Spartan kings.

In the fifth century *tyrannos* (“tyrant”) was a pejorative term, used often as an accusation against a political opponent, and the first use of ostracism at Athens (a state-wide vote to expel a political leader for ten years) in 487 was to exile “friends of the tyrants.” But in the fourth century the age of the tyrants (546–510) was remembered as an “age of Kronos,” a golden age before the defeat of Athens during the democracy. The tyrants set Athens on the road to her future greatness in the fifth century under the democracy. They provided political and economic stability after a period of bitter economic class-conflict in the early sixth century, attracted artists and



Map 1.1 *Map of Attica. Italicized sites are known to have had a theater.*

poets to their court at Athens, inaugurated a building program that would be surpassed only by the grandeur of the Acropolis in the next century, established or enhanced the festival of the Panthenaia, the four-yearly celebration of Athene and of Athens, and instituted contests for the recitation of the Homeric poems, establishing incidentally the first “official” text of Homer. The tyrants quelled discontent and divisions within the state and instilled a common sense of identity that paved the way for Athens’ greatness in the next century. Peisistratos created also a single festival of Dionysos at Athens, the **City Dionysia** in late March. This did not replace, but augmented the Rural Dionysia celebrated locally throughout Attica in late autumn. As

late March marked the opening of the sailing season and the arrival in Athens of overseas visitors, the City Dionysia was thus a festival for all Athenians and their guests. It was at this festival that tragedy was first performed.

Economic success and cultural advancement were followed by political and military developments, which propelled Athens into the forefront of Greek city-states by the middle of the fifth century. First tyranny was replaced by democracy. Political maneuvering following the expulsion of Hippias in 510 resulted in the establishment of a democratic form of government in 507, eventually possessing a popular assembly (*ekklesiā*), elected officials, a jury-system, and two important watch-words: *isonomia* ("equality under the law") and *parrhēsia* ("freedom of speech"). Next came the successful defense against a threat from the powerful Persian empire to the east, three invasions of Greece (492, 490, 481–479), thwarted by crucial victories at Marathon (490) and Salamis (480), in which Athens played a key role. After the wars a league established under Athens' leadership to defend against future Persian attacks had by the mid 450s become an Athenian *archē* ("empire"). A massive building program replaced the buildings destroyed by the Persians, of which the best-known is the Parthenon on the Acropolis. An atmosphere of success and self-confidence dominated Athens in the fifth century, much in the same way that success in World War II, coupled with their sense of manifest destiny, catapulted the United States into a position of world leadership.

The time-frame

On whatever date we prefer for its formal institution, tragedy was not "invented" overnight and we may imagine some sort of choral performances in the sixth century developing into what would be called "tragedy." Thus, even though the first extant play (Aeschylus' *Persians*) belongs in 472, we need to begin our study of drama in the sixth century. Like any form of art drama has its different periods, each with its own style and leading poets. The one we know best corresponds with Athens' ascendancy in the Greek world (479–404), from which we have the canonical "Three" of tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophokles, Euripides), forty-six complete or reasonably complete plays, as well as a wealth of fragments and *testimonia* about lost plays and authors. New tragedies continued to be written and performed in the fourth century and well into the third, but along with the new arose a fascination with the old, and competitions were widened to include "old" or revived plays. In the third century tragic activity shifted to the scholar-poets of **Alexandria**, but here it is uncertain whether these tragedies were meant to be read rather than performed, and if performed, for how wide an audience.

The evidence suggests that satyr-drama is a later addition to the dramatic festivals; most scholars accept a date of introduction ca. 501. In the fifth century one satyr-drama would follow the performance of the three tragedies by each competing playwright, but by 340 satyr-drama was divorced from the tragic competitions and only one performed at the opening of the festival. Thus at some point during the fourth century satyr-drama becomes its own separate genre.

Formal competitions for comedy began later than tragedy and satyr-drama, the canonical date being the Dionysia of 486. The ancient critics divided comedy at Athens into three distinct chronological phases: Old Comedy, roughly synonymous with the classical fifth century (486 to ca. 385); Middle Comedy (ca. 385–325, or “between **Aristophanes** and **Menander**”); New Comedy (325 onward). We have complete plays surviving from the first and third of these periods. The ancients knew also that comedy flourished at Syracuse in the early fifth century and that there was something from the same period called “Megarian comedy.”

The evidence

We face two distinct problems in approaching Greek drama: the distance in time and culture from our own, and the sheer loss of evidence. We are dealing with texts that are nearly 2500 years removed in time, written in another language and produced for an audience with cultural assumptions very different from our own. “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” wrote L.P. Hartley, and we should not react to reading (or watching) an ancient Greek drama in the same way that we approach a play by Shakespeare or Shaw or Pinter.

The actual evidence is of four sorts: the texts themselves, literary *testimonia*, physical remains of theaters, and visual representations of theatrical scenes. So far the manuscript tradition and discoveries on papyrus (see fig. 4.4) have yielded as complete texts thirty-one tragedies, one satyr-drama, one quasi-satyr-drama, and thirteen comedies. But these belong to only five (perhaps six or seven) distinct playwrights, out of the dozens that we know were active on the Greek stage. We often assume that Aeschylus, Sophokles, and Euripides (for tragedy), and Aristophanes and Menander (for comedy) were the best at their business, but were they representative of all that the Athenians watched during those two centuries? Within these individual authors we have only six or seven plays out of eighty or so by Aeschylus, seven out of 120 by Sophokles, eighteen out of ninety by Euripides, eleven comedies out of forty by Aristophanes, and only two comedies by Menander from over 100. On what grounds were these selections made, by whom, for whom, and when? Are these selected plays representative of their author’s larger opus? For Euripides we have both a selected collection of ten plays and an alphabetical sequence of nine plays that may be more representative of his work as a whole.

We do not possess anything remotely close to the scripts of the original productions or to the official texts that were established by **Lykourgos** ca. 330 and then passed to the Library in Alexandria. We have some remains preserved on papyrus from the Roman period, most notably Menander’s *The Grouch*, virtually complete on a codex from the third century AD, but the earliest manuscripts of Greek drama belong about AD 1000, and these are the products of centuries of copying and recopying. Dionysos in *Frogs* (405) talks of “sitting on my ship reading [Euripides’] *Andromeda*” and for the fifth century we know of book-stalls in the marketplace; these would not have been elaborate “books” in our sense of the word, but very basic texts allowing the reader to recreate his experience in the theater. The manuscripts and papyri present texts in

an abbreviated form, with no division between words, changes of speaker often indicated (if at all) by an underlining or a dicolon, no stage directions – almost all the directions in a modern translation are the creation of the translator – and very frequent errors, omissions, and additions to the text. For plays such as Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers* and Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* we depend on one manuscript only for a complete text of the play.

In addition to the actual texts, we have considerable literary *testimonia* about the dramatic tradition generally and about individual plays and personalities. Most important is Aristotle's *Poetics*, a sketchily written treatise, principally on tragedy and epic, dating from ca. 330, but with some general introductory comments on the early history of drama. Aristotle was himself not an Athenian by birth, although resident there for many years, and wrote 100 years after the high period of Attic tragedy. The great question in dealing with *Poetics* is whether Aristotle knows what he is talking about, or whether he is extrapolating backwards in much the same manner as a modern critic. He would have seen plays performed in the theater, both new dramas of the fourth century and revivals of the old masters, and he did have access to much documentary material that we lack. An early work was his *Production Lists*, the records of the productions and victories from the inception of the contests ca. 501. He would have had access to writers on drama and dramatists; the anecdotes of Ion of Chios, himself a dramatist and contemporary of Sophokles; Sophokles' own work *On the Chorus*; and perhaps the lost work by Glaukos of Rhegion (ca. 400), *On the Old Poets and Musicians*. Thus his raw material would have been far greater than ours. But would this pure data have shed any light on the early history of the genre? Was he, at times, just making an educated guess? When Aristotle makes a pronouncement, we need to pay attention, but also to wonder how secure is the evidence on which he bases that conclusion.

His *Poetics* is partly an analytical breakdown of the genre of tragedy into its component parts and partly a guide for reader and playwright, and contains much that is both hard to follow and controversial: the "end" of tragedy is a *katharsis* of pity and fear (chapter 6); one can have a tragedy without character, but not without plot; the best tragic characters are those who fall into misfortune through some *hamartia* (chapter 13). This last term is often mistranslated as "tragic flaw." But this would give Greek tragedy an emphasis on character, whereas Aristotle at this point (chapters 7–14) is discussing tragic plots. It is better rendered as "a mistake made in ignorance," and as such restores Aristotle's emphasis on plot.

Other useful sources include the Attic orators of the fourth century, who often quote from the tragic poets to reinforce their rhetorical points. For example, Lykourgos, the fourth-century orator responsible for the rebuilding of the theater at Athens ca. 330, gives us fifty-five lines from Euripides' lost *Erechtheus*, in which a mother consents to the sacrifice of her daughter to save Athens. The fourth book of the *Onomasticon* ("Thesaurus") by Pollux (second century AD) contains much that is useful about the ancient theater, especially a list of technical terms and a description of the masks worn by certain comic type-characters. The Roman architectural writer, Vitruvius (first century AD), has much to say about theatrical buildings especially of the Hellenistic period. The "book fragments" of the lost plays are usually quotations from

a wide variety of ancient and mediaeval writers. Two in particular are useful for the student of drama: the polymath Athenaios (second century AD), whose *Experts at Dining* contains a treasury of citations, and Stobaios (fourth/fifth century AD), a collector of familiar quotations. The first-century-AD scholar, Dion of Prusa, sheds light on the three tragedies on the subject of Philoktetes and the bow of Herakles, by summarizing the plots and styles of all three – useful, since we possess only the version by Sophokles (409).

Inscriptions provide another source of written evidence. The ancients would display publicly their decrees, rolls of officials, casualty lists, and records of competitions. One inscription contains a partial list of the victors at the Dionysia in **dithyramb**, comedy, and tragedy (*IG ii² 2318*), another presents the tragic and comic victors at both festivals in order of their first victory (*IG ii² 2325*), a Roman inscription lists the various victories of Kallias, a comedian of the 430s, in order of finish (first through fifth). Two inscriptions (*IG ii² 2320, 2323*) give invaluable details about the contests at the Dionysia for 341, 340, and 311, especially that by 340 satyr-drama was performed separately at the start of the festival. A decree from Aixone (312 – *SEG 36.186*) records the honors given by that deme to two *chorēgoi* who have performed their duties with distinction.

As physical evidence the remains of hundreds of Greek and Roman theaters are known, ranging from the major sites of Athens, Delphi, Epidauros, Dodona, Syracuse, and Ephesos to small theaters tucked away in the backwoods. The actual physical details of a Greek theater will be discussed below, but some general comments are appropriate here. Most of the theaters are not in their fifth-century condition, since major rebuilding took place in the fourth century, in the Hellenistic period (300–30 BC), and especially under Roman occupation. When the tourist or the student visits Athens today, the theater that he or she sees (fig. 1.1) is not the structure that Aeschylus or Aristophanes knew. We see curved stone seats, reserved seating in the front row, a paved *orchēstra* floor, and an elaborate raised structure in the middle of the *orchēstra*. We have perhaps been misled by the classical perfection of the famous theater at Epidauros (fig. 1.2) into thinking that this is typical of all ancient theaters. The Athenian theater of the fifth century had straight benches on the hillside, an *orchēstra* floor of packed earth (an *orchēstra* that may not have been a perfect circle), and a wooden building at the back of the *orchēstra*. At Athens and Syracuse later theaters replaced the old on the same site, while at Argos the impressive and large fourth-century theater was built on a new site, the fifth-century theater being more compact and smaller in size, with straight front-facing rows of seating rather than curved (fig. 1.3).

The theaters that we do have, from whatever period of Greek antiquity, tell us much about the physical experience of attending the theater. Audiences were large and sat as a community in the open air – this was not theater of the private enclosed space. Distances were great – to someone in the last row at Epidauros a performer in the *orchēstra* would appear only a few inches high. Thus theater of the individual expression was out – impossible in fact since the performers wore masks. But acoustics were superb and directed spectators' attention to what was being said or sung. Special effects were limited – the word and the gesture carried the force of the drama. The



Figure 1.1 *Theater of Dionysos, Athens. Photo by Ian Vining.*



Figure 1.2 *Theater at Epidauros. Photo by Steve Smith.*



Figure 1.3 *Seating in the fifth-century theater at Argos. Photo by I.C. Storey.*

prominence and centrality of the *orchēstra* reflect the importance of the chorus – Greek audiences were used to seeing more rather than fewer performers before them.

Most of the visual representations are found on Greek vases. This particular form of Greek art begins to reach its classical perfection with the black figure pottery of the late sixth century (figures appear in black against a red background), and continues with the exquisite red figure (the reverse) of the fifth and fourth centuries. About 520 we start to see representations of public performances, usually marked by the presence of an *aulos*-player, and then scenes inspired by tragedy, satyr-drama, and comedy.

The vases do not show an actual performance of a tragedy, although one Athenian vase (460–450 – see cover illustration) shows a chorister dressed as a **maenad** and an actor holding his mask, while another from the 430s shows a pair of performers preparing to dress as maenads (see fig. 1.10). But from 450 onward vases do display scenes clearly influenced by tragedy: the opening-scene of *Libation-Bearers* (see fig. 5.1), a series of vases depicting Sophokles' early tragedy *Andromeda*, another group reflecting Euripides' innovative *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, the "Cleveland Medea" (see fig. 5.2), a striking fourth-century tableau illustrating the opening scenes of *Eumenides* (see fig. 5.4), and equally impressive scenes from Sophokles' *Oedipus at Kolonos* and Euripides' *Alkestis* (see fig. 5.3). One or two of these show a pillar structure, which may be an attempt to render the central door of the *skēnē*, but these vases are not depicting

an actual tragic performance. The characters do not wear masks, males are often shown heroically nude (or nearly so) instead of wearing the distinctive costume of tragedy, and there is no hint of the *aulos*-player, a sure sign of a representation of a performance. For satyr-drama the superb Pronomos Vase (see fig. 3.1), from the very end of the fifth century, shows the performers of a satyr-drama by Demetrios in various degrees of their on-stage dress, accompanied by the *aulos*-player, Pronomos.

For comedy early vases show padded dancers in a celebration (*kōmos*) and men performing in animal-choruses. Some identify these as the predecessors to comedy. From the fifth century there is not much direct evidence. The Perseus Vase (ca. 420) showing a comic performer on a raised platform before two spectators may or may not reflect a performance in the theater; it might equally well reflect a private performance at a symposium. But there is a wealth of vases from the fourth century, principally from the south of Italy, which show grotesquely masked and padded comic performers with limp and dangling *phalloi* in humorous situations. For a long time these were thought to be representations of a local Italian farce called *phlyakes*, but it is now accepted that these reflect Athenian Old and Middle Comedy which, contrary to accepted belief, was performed in the Greek cities of southern Italy. Some vases show a raised stage with steps and the double door of drama and thus are plainly illustrating an actual stage performance. The most famous of these are the Würzburg Telephos (see fig. 4.3), a vase from about 370 which depicts a scene from Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* (411); a vase by Assteas (ca. 350) showing a scene from Eupolis' lost comedy, *Demes* (417); and the *Chorēgoi* Vase (see fig. 4.2), which seems to show figures from both comedy and tragedy.

Sculptural representations of drama are less common. A relief from the late fifth century shows three actors holding masks before Dionysos and his consort – some have conjectured that this is the cast of Euripides' prize-winning *Bacchae*. A stele from Aixone (313/2) records honors accorded to two successful *chorēgoi* from that deme and displays five comic masks and two crowns as well as a scene of Dionysos with a young satyr. Many terracotta masks from various periods shed valuable light on what comic masks looked like. Scenes from the comedy of Menander (career: 325–290) were often part of the decoration of ancient houses, most notably a fresco in the “House of Menander” in Pompeii (destroyed in AD 79 by the eruption of Vesuvius) and a third-century-AD house in Mytilene on Lesbos, where eleven floor mosaics remain, with a title and named characters that allow us to identify the exact scene depicted.

The Dramatic Festivals

In the city of Athens drama was produced principally at two festivals honoring the god Dionysos, the **Lenaia** and the City Dionysia. We discuss below the extent to which drama (in particular, tragedy) was a form of “religious” expression and what, if anything, Greek drama had to do with Dionysos. We are concerned here with the details and mechanics of the festivals and the place of drama within them. While the festivals honored the god Dionysos and the plays were performed in a theater adjoining his sacred precinct, they were also state occasions run by the public officials

of Athens, part of the communal life of the city (*polis*). We shall need to consider also the extent to which drama at Athens was “political,” in the various senses of the word.

Dionysos was honored at Athens with a number of celebrations: the Rural Dionysia (held in the local communities of Attica in late autumn); the Lenaia in late January; the Anthesteria (“Flower Time”) in mid-February; and the City Dionysia in late March or early April. While we know that dramatic competitions certainly occurred at some of the Rural Dionysia throughout Attica, the main dramatic festivals were the Lenaia and the City Dionysia. The oldest and principal venue was the City Dionysia, which occupied five days in the Athenian month of Elaphebolion (“Deer Hunt”), corresponding to late March or early April. The tyrant, Peisistratos (ruled mid 540s to 527) is said to have created one splendid Dionysia to be held within the city of Athens. A myth was developed to document the progress of the god Dionysos from Eleutherai, a community on the northern border of Attica, to Athens itself. Since Eleutherai had recently become part of Attica, there would have been also a political element at work here.

Preliminaries to the actual festival included a *proagōn* (“precontest”) on 8 Elaphebolion, at which the poets would appear with their actors and chorus and give hints about their forthcoming compositions, and on 9 Elaphebolion Dionysos’ statue was taken from the precinct of his temple to the Academy on the north-west outskirts of Athens, where the road from Eleutherai approached the city, in preparation for the formal *pompē* (“parade”) the next day. The actual details and order of events at the festival are not established with certainty, but the following scheme is a probable one for the 430s:

The City Dionysia, ca. 430

Preliminaries:	8 Elaphebolion	<i>proagōn</i> (“precontest”)
	9 Elaphebolion	“introduction” of Dionysos
Events:	10 Elaphebolion	<i>pompē</i> (parade); dithyrambic contests (men and boys)
	11 Elaphebolion	comic contest (five poets, one play each)
	12 Elaphebolion	tragedian A (three tragedies, one satyr-drama)
	13 Elaphebolion	tragedian B (three tragedies, one satyr-drama)
	14 Elaphebolion	tragedian C (three tragedies, one satyr-drama); awarding of the prizes, parade of the victors

After the festival, a special session of the *ekklēsia* was convened within the theater, rather than in its usual meeting-place on the Pnyx, to consider the conduct of the festival for that year.

There has been considerable debate whether the number of comedies was cut from five to three during the **Peloponnesian War** (431–404) and whether these three remaining comedies were moved, one each to follow the satyr-drama on each of three days devoted to tragedy, thus shaving the festival to four days. In the hypotheses to Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (423-D), *Peace* (421-D), and *Birds* (414-D), only three plays and poets are given, whereas a Roman inscription records fourth- and fifth-place finishes for Kallias in the 430s and five plays are also attested for the Dionysia in the fourth century. Aristophanes’ *Wealth* was part of a production of five comedies in 388, but

it is not known at what festival it was performed. A passage from *Birds* (414-D) is crucial here: “There is nothing better or more pleasant than to grow wings. If one of you spectators had wings, when he got hungry and bored with the tragic choruses, he could fly off, go home, and have a good meal, and when he was full, fly back to us” (785–9). If the “us” means “comic performers,” which is the natural flow of the passage, then in 414 comedy was performed on the same day as tragedy. Those who deny that comedy was reduced from five productions to three must argue that “us” means the theater generally, that the now refreshed spectator would be returning for a later tragedy. But when a comic chorus uses “us,” it usually refers to its identity as a comic chorus and not as part of the general theatrical community. It is usually assumed that comedy was reduced for economic reasons during the War, but comedy was a controversial genre in the 430s and 420s. We know of one decree forbidding personal humor in comedy from 439 to 436, and of at least two personal attacks by Kleon on Aristophanes in 426 and 423. The reduction may have had as much to do with the now dangerously topical nature of comedy as with economic savings. Comedy also employed more chorus-members and to eliminate two plays was to free up fifty more Athenians for military service.

The dramatic competitions continued to change over the next century, and certain inscriptions yield valuable information about the dramatic presentations around 340, at which time the festival was being re-organized. By 340 the satyr-drama had separated from the tragic presentations and a single such play opened the festival (Timokles’ *Lykourgos* in 340 and someone’s *Daughters of Phorkos* in 339). In 386 an “old tragedy” was introduced into the festival – Euripides’ *Iphigeneia* in 341, his *Orestes* in 340, and another of his plays in 339. In 341 three tragic poets each presented three tragedies, employing three actors, each of whom performed in one play by each playwright, but in 340 the tragedians have only two plays and two actors each. Sharing the lead actors among all the competing poets would presumably have allowed each to demonstrate their abilities irrespective of the text that they had to interpret and the abilities of the dramatist whose plays they were performing. In 339 we are told that “for the first time the comic poets put on an ‘old’ comedy.” Another inscription shows that dithyrambs for men and boys were still part of the Dionysia in 332–328 and lists the victors in the order: dithyramb, comedy, tragedy.

The City Dionysia in 340 (IG ii² 2320.16–29)

Satyr-drama: *Lykourgos* by Timokles.

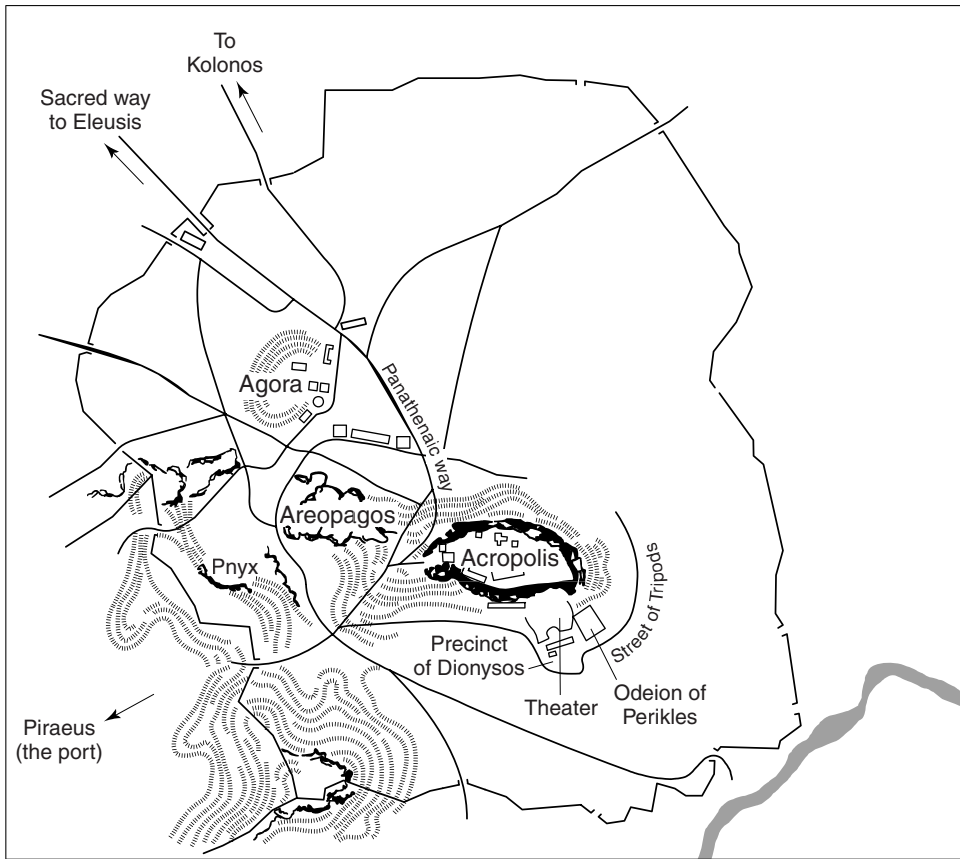
“Old” tragedy: Euripides’ *Orestes*, presented by Neoptolemos.

First prize: Astydamos, with *Parthenopaios* (lead actor: Neoptolemos) and *Lykaon* (lead actor: Thettalos).

Second prize: Timokles, with *Phrixos* (lead actor: Thettalos) and *Oedipus* (lead actor: Neoptolemos).

Third prize: Euaretos, with *Alkmaion* (lead actor: Thettalos) and . . . *Je* (lead actor: Neoptolemos).

Actor’s prize: Thettalos.



Map 1.2 Map of Athens.

The Lenaia took place in the Athenian month of Gamelion (“Marriage”), which corresponds to our late January. It was an ancient festival of the Ionian Greeks, to which ethnic group the Athenians belonged. We know little about the purpose and rituals of the Lenaia – mystical elements have been suggested, or a celebration of the birth of Dionysos, or the ritual of *sparagmos* (eating the raw flesh of the prey). A parade is attested with “jokes from the wagons,” that is, insults directed at those watching, as well as a general Dionysiac sense of abandon. The evidence suggests that the celebrations of the Lenaia were originally performed in the *agora*, rather than at the precinct of Dionysos at the south-east corner of the Acropolis (“Dionysos-in-the-Marshes”), where the theater itself would later be located. Whereas the City Dionysia was under the control of the **archon** eponymous, once the leading political official at Athens, the Lenaia was handled by the archon *basileus*, who had taken over the traditional religious role of the early kings.

Competitions for tragedy and comedy were introduced to the Lenaia around 440. It is sometimes assumed that this was a less prestigious festival, at which newcomers

would try their hand before producing at the more important Dionysia. Eratosthenes, a scholar of the third century BC, seems to suggest that a relegation system was in operation:

The thea[trical productions] were [of two types]: the Lenae[an appear not to have been equ]ally reputable, perhaps also because of the fact that in s[pring the al]lies had already c[ome from abroa]d to see [the performances and do b]usiness. With “t[o the city” the Dionysia is indicated. Eratosthenes also says of Plato (the comic poet) that as long as he had his plays produced by others, he did well; but when he first produced a play on his own, *Security (Rhabdouchoi)*, and placed fourth, he was pushed back to the Lenaea. [This is part of a second-century commentary on an Old Comedy. The translation given here is that of Csapo and Slater (1995) nr. 71, p. 135. The Plato mentioned here is not the philosopher, but a comic poet, active 424–380, often spelled “Platon” to prevent confusion.]

But Eratosthenes’ conclusion may be based on *didaskalia* (“production records”), which showed Platon finishing fourth at the Dionysia in one year and then producing only at the Lenaia in the next year.

In *Acharnians* (425) the main character declares that “this is the contest at the Lenaia, and we are by ourselves,” i.e. only Athenians and **metics** (*metoikoi* – “resident foreigners”) were present, while the Dionysia in late March marked the re-opening of travel by sea, the arrival of ambassadors, and the bringing of the tribute by the allies to Athens and would thus have had a more international audience. At the Lenaia metics could perform as choristers and act as *chorēgoi*, a practice that was not allowed at the Dionysia. There is no evidence in the classical period for either dithyramb or satyr-drama at the Lenaia; the formal entertainment seems to have been tragedy and comedy only. Nor do we have firm evidence for the number of plays produced. An inscription of 418 (*IG ii*² 2319 col. ii) shows that two tragedians produced two plays each, while another of 363 gives the number of tragic poets as three. For comedy the hypotheses to *Acharnians* (425-L), *Knights* (424-L), *Wasps* (422-L), and *Frogs* (405-L) record only three plays, while two Roman inscriptions show that five comedies were performed at the Lenaia before and after the Peloponnesian War (431–404).

The Rural Dionysia was celebrated in the various local communities (called “demes,” 139 in the classical period) of Attica, and there is considerable evidence for the performance of drama in as many as twenty of the demes (map 1.1), principally the larger ones such as Acharnai, Eleusis, and Ikarion. A small deme theater is extant at Thorikos (see map 1.4) in the south-east of Attica, and the port city of Peiraieus is known to have had an important theater, where Euripides produced and Sokrates attended. Plato (*Republic* 475d) tells of theater-mad spectators, who would attend one Rural Dionysia after another. These productions were probably revivals of earlier plays produced at the Athenian festivals, to allow those unable to travel to the city to see the plays that they had missed. Like the festivals in the city, these were competitions. Evidence suggests that Aixone, Rhamnous, and Anagyros seem to have staged only comedy, while Paiania was restricted to tragedy. All three competitions (dithyramb, tragedy, comedy) are known at Eleusis. A particularly interesting inscription at Eleusis from the last decade of the fifth century attests to a double *chorēgia* and victories by Sophokles and Aristophanes: “*IG ii*² 3090: Gnathis son of Timokedes,

Anaxandrides son of Timagoros won the victory as *chorēgoi* for comedy. Aristophanes was *didaskalos*. <They also won> another victory in tragedy, for which Sophokles was *didaskalos*." *Didaskalos* ("teacher") means the person who brought on the play, usually, but not always, the author. "Director" comes closer than "producer," but is misleading since modern plays and movies are rarely directed by their author.

Aspiring playwrights would apply to the official in charge of the festival months in advance for a chorus and the technical term for success was "to be granted a chorus." The officials, the archon *basileus* for the Lenaia and the archon *eponymous* for the Dionysia, took up their positions at the start of the institutional Athenian year in early July and would have begun immediately on their preparations for the festivals which were only months away (in the case of the Lenaia just seven). We are not certain how much of a play (or plays) an aspiring comic or tragic poet would submit to the archon, or the extent to which past reputation, youth, or personal connections played a role in the selection. A successful tragic poet seems to be staging a production every two years; thus a playwright might be well advanced on a group of plays by the time of the selection of poets. Comedy speaks harshly of one archon who turned down Sophokles in favor of the inferior Gnesippos: "[the archon] who wouldn't give Sophokles a chorus, but did grant one to the son of Kleomachos [Gnesippos], whom I wouldn't consider worthy to put on plays for me, not even at the Adonia" (Kratinos F 17). The speaker here could be a *chorēgos*, another archon, or possibly Tragedy herself.

After the poets were selected, the archons would appoint *chorēgoi* for the twenty dithyrambic choruses, three *chorēgoi* for tragedy (one for each playwright), and five for comedy (again one for each competitor). The word *chorēgos* (plural: *chorēgoi*) means "chorus bringer," and these were wealthy Athenians whose job it would be to recruit choristers, hire a trainer, provide a training-space, maintain these choristers, provide the costumes and masks and any special effects and properties that would be needed. Thus the *chorēgos* was both providing the chorus and providing for its members. A *chorēgia* was a state-imposed duty (technical term: *leitourgia*, "liturgy") on the very richest of Athenians, and was considered a patriotic duty as important as outfitting a warship in the navy. There is an interesting tension here between the demands of the state to provide this popular entertainment and the self-glorification of the *chorēgoi* as the splendid individuals who provided that entertainment. Wilson puts it well (2000: 54), "For the performance of a *leitourgia* was an act of *giving* to the demos, with all the implications of reciprocal obligation that the gift brings." In the law-courts speakers would point to their services as a *chorēgoi* as evidence of their good character and democratic sentiments. One such example occurs at Antiphon I.β.12 (ca. 420):

When you look at the deeds of my life, you will realize that I have never plotted against anyone nor sought what was not mine. On the contrary, I have paid large property-taxes, often served as a trierarch, sponsored a splendid chorus, loaned money to many people, put up substantial guarantees on others' behalf. I acquired my wealth, not through the law-court, but through my own hard work, being a god-fearing and law-abiding person. Being of such a nature, then do not convict me of anything unholy or shameful.

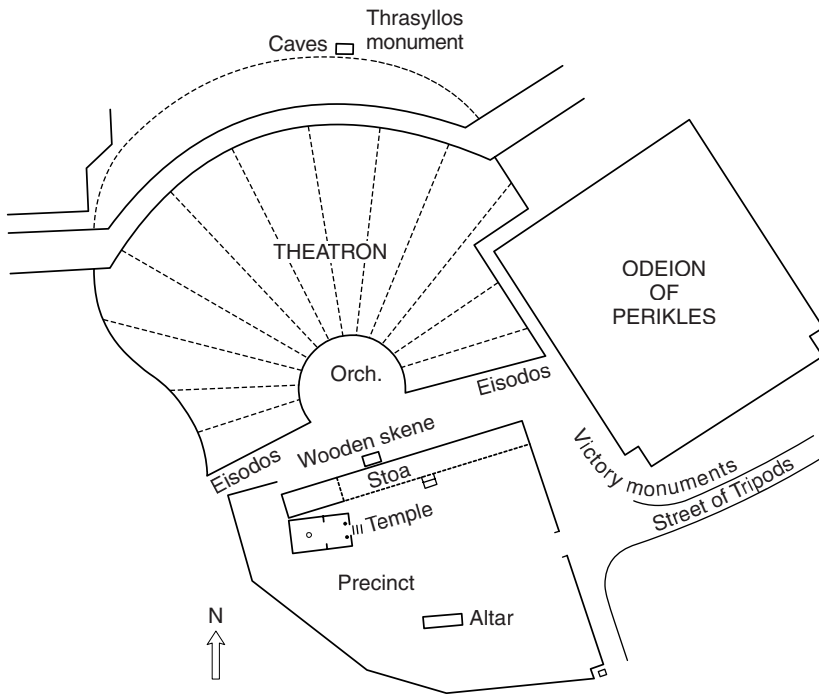
Lysias 21 shows us a young man stating with pride that in his frequent and enthusiastic service as a *chorēgos* he has spent almost four times what a normal *chorēgos* might lay out.

Not all would-be *chorēgoi* participated with enthusiasm, however. It was possible to be exempted from liturgical service, and we know also of a mechanism, called the *antidosis*, where a person designated to perform a liturgy, could challenge another whom he thought wealthier than himself to take on that role. Aristophanes at *Acharnians* 1150–72 (425-L) blasts a *chorēgos* named Antimachos for some sort of unfriendly behavior after the festival, and at *Peace* 1019–20 implies that the particular *chorēgos* of this comedy is somewhat less than generous. At Eupolis F 329 someone exclaims, “Have you ever met a more stingy *chorēgos*?” We detect a comic stereotype here, the less-than-generous sponsor.

A *chorēgia* provided an opportunity for the *chorēgos* to revel in the splendor of his position. This moment of glory was part of their return for undertaking the expense of sponsoring a dramatic performance. We know that Alkibiades (451–403) wore a special purple robe when he served as *chorēgos* and that Demosthenes in the 340s had prepared gold crowns and a tunic sewn with gold for his service as a dithyrambic *chorēgos*. In the victory-lists the name of the victorious *chorēgos* is given before that of the winning poet: “[for 473/2] comedy: Xenokleides was the *chorēgos*, Magnes the *didaskalos*; tragedy: Perikles of Cholargai was the *chorēgos*, Aeschylus the *didaskalos*.” Perhaps a modern equivalent is the announcement of the award for Best Picture at the Academy Awards, where the name read out is that of the producer (often virtually unknown), rather than the high-profile director or the leading actors. But in the public atmosphere at Athens the *chorēgos* was someone whom everyone would know – the *chorēgos* himself would see to that. After the announcement of the results an exuberant procession led the victors to a sacrifice and celebration of the victory.

A visible sign of a *chorēgos*’ triumph was the erection of a permanent memorial to display the bronze tripod awarded to the winning *chorēgos*. These tripods were large (some over three meters high) and expensive (costing over 1000 drachmas), and were dedicated by mounting them on a stone base, with an inscription commemorating the event. We know that the main street leading from the *agora* around the north-east slope of the Acropolis to the east (main) entrance of the theater was called “Street of the Tripods” (map 1.3), and that it was one of the most prominent and favored walking areas of Athens. The monument commemorating Lysikrates, the victorious *chorēgos* in 334 (fig. 1.4), has survived in quite reasonable condition, and remains a popular tourist attraction just off Vironos Street in modern Athens. The monument of Thrasyllos (319) was an enclosure set into the hillside above the theater and closed with elaborate gates (fig. 1.5).

Of the three genres of performance at the Dionysia the sponsorship of tragedy held the most prestige and formed the highest rung on the liturgical ladder. When Demosthenes (21.156) insists that sponsoring a dithyramb was more expensive than tragedy, he is contrasting his own *chorēgia* with a dithyramb with the sponsorship of tragedy by his opponent Meidias. At the City Dionysia of the year 406/5 two *chorēgoi* shared the expense of sponsoring the productions on that occasion (Σ *Frogs* 405). This was a time of financial hardship for Athens because of the loss of income from the silver mines, the need to import food due to the enemy’s ravaging of the fields of Attica, and the tremendous expense of rebuilding and outfitting the Athenian navy, and rather than stint on the splendor of the festival, the Athenians preferred to maintain standards by doubling the *chorēgia*.



Map 1.3 Theater of Dionysos (classical period).

We do not know how *chorēgoi* and poets were matched. For the dithyrambs the *chorēgos* would come from the tribe whose men or boys were competing, but for drama we cannot say whether the *chorēgos* or the poet had any say in the assignment. Some good evidence for the Thargelia, where dithyrambs were performed, reveals that the *chorēgos* received his poet by lot, but this may just mean that the *chorēgos* who won the lot was able to choose first. In some cases there does seem to be a close relationship between dramatist and *chorēgos*. In 476 Themistokles, the architect of the victory over the Persians in 480, acted as sponsor for the productions by **Phrynichos** that included his *Phoenician Women*, a tragedy that dramatized the story of that defeat of the Persians. In 472 the *chorēgos* for Aeschylus' *Persians*, which covered much the same material as Phrynichos, was the young **Perikles**, who would become heir to Themistokles' politics. We wonder about Xenokles of Aphidna who was *chorēgos* for Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 458. In the third play of that trilogy Aeschylus brings in contemporary political issues. How did Xenokles feel about these issues? In his *Trojan Women* of 415 Euripides seems to allow the preparations for the Armada against Sicily to intrude into his dramatization of the fall of Troy. Did Euripides' *chorēgos* share his hostility to aggressive war? How would a *chorēgos* from the *nouveaux riches* react to sponsoring a conservatively minded political comedy by Aristophanes or Eupolis?

The dramatic presentations were competitions. This should not surprise us since today some of the most popular world-wide cultural events are awards ceremonies



Figure 1.4 *Lysikrates Monument, Athens. Photo by I.C. Storey.*

(the Academy Awards, the Palme d'Or in Cannes, the Emmy Awards for television, the Grammys for popular music, the Man Booker Prize for fiction, etc.). We know also the ancient Greeks were an intensely competitive people, for whom the great cycle of competitions were major events in the life of that society. The Pythian Games at Delphi began as competitions in music and poetry before the athletic events were added, and musical contests were part of the four-yearly festival of the Panthenaia ("All-Athenian") at Athens. When the Athenian populace was divided into ten tribes in the last decade of the sixth century, each tribe performed a dithyramb, the large-scale choral song, one for fifty men and one for fifty boys. It must have seemed natural to them that these performances would be judged and prizes awarded.



Figure 1.5 *Theater of Dionysos, looking toward the Acropolis. The square recess is the Thrasyllos Monument. Photo by Ian Vining.*

There were ten judges, one from each of the ten tribes, appointed or selected in some manner that we do not know. Plutarch tells a story about the Dionysia of 468, when the ten *stratēgoi* (“generals” the ten political and military leaders of Athens, elected yearly) were compelled by the archon to judge the contest for tragedy and awarded the prize to the young Sophokles, competing for the first time. But the story is late (ca. AD 100, nearly 500 years after the event) and sounds rather too good to be true. The judges would take an oath to judge fairly – as do two representative officials at the opening of the modern Olympics – and each judge would cast his vote for the winning entry, be it in the dithyramb for boys and for men, tragedy, or comedy. Of these ten votes only five were selected by lot – lot being used in Athenian practice to forestall bribery of public officials – and the prizes awarded on the basis of these five votes. The speaker of Lysias’ fourth oration states clearly that his adversary had been a judge at the festival, and that “he wrote his vote on his tablet, but was excluded by the lot” (4.3).

Obviously there could be problems. One that springs quickly to mind is that a particular playwright could have the support of seven of the ten judges, but if the five unused votes were all for him, he could lose by three votes to two – assuming that the other three all voted for the same rival. How were ties broken? Suppose a particular tragic competition resulted in two votes for A, two votes for B, and one vote for C. Was the judge for C pressed to break the tie, or was the vote of a sixth judge employed? Results, one suspects, could have been controversial and perhaps

even made an item on the agenda of the *ekklēsia* that examined the conduct of the competition. The most thorough summary of the judging is that of Marshall and Van Willigenburg (2004).

Comedy, as befits its tendency to break the dramatic illusion and call attention to itself, often mentions and even addresses the judges (*kritai*) directly. The choruses of both *Clouds* (423 – lines 1115–30) and *Birds* (414 – lines 1102–17) speak briefly to the judges within their dramatic role on why they should award their play first prize and threaten the dire consequences of a negative decision. At the end of *Assembly-Women* (392 – lines 1154–62) the chorus of women appeals openly to the judges for the poet – note the singular “me”:

I wish to give the judges a bit of advice: to the clever among you remember the clever bits and vote for me, to those among you who like to laugh vote for me because of the jokes. I'm asking just about everyone to vote for me. And don't let the order of the draw tell against us, because I was drawn first. Keep this in mind and don't break your oaths, but judge all the choruses fairly, and don't behave like second-rate whores who remember only their last lover.

This is a significant passage for the study of ancient drama (in particular, comedy) since it provides evidence for the existence of different sorts of audience, the oath of the judges, that the order of the plays was determined by lot, and that a poet could make last-minute changes to his play once he knew the order of production.

Did the judges take popular reaction into account? Today at the Academy Awards it is almost automatic that the highest grossing or most popular movie of the year will not do well in the awards, but one wonders if the judges could have ignored a popular groundswell of approbation or disapproval. Comedy does appeal directly to the judges, but also to the spectators. In fact it is significant that Aristophanes blames the failure of his first *Clouds* (423-D) not on the judges, but on the spectators at large, at *Clouds* 518–62 and again at *Wasps* 1043–59:

And furthermore he swears by Dionysos over many libations that you never heard better comedy than this [first *Clouds*], and it is to your shame that you did not realize it at once. But our poet is no less recognized by the clever ones among you . . . so, my good friends, in the future love and cherish those poets who seek to say something new.

Again the poet suggests that there may be different tastes among the spectators, although the appeal may just be a flattering attempt for every spectator to consider himself “clever.” Aelian (early third century AD) records that at the production of the first *Clouds* of Aristophanes the audience shouted down to the judges to award first prize to that comedy, when that play finished third. Plato (*Laws* 659a–b) complains that judges are too influenced by the roar of the crowd in rendering their verdicts in favor of those who provide the spectators with an unseemly and indecent pleasure.

Crowns of laurel or ivy or roses were symbolic of celebrations and triumphs in ancient culture. Winning athletes, victorious poets, participants at sacrifices, guests at dinner-parties and symposia, messengers announcing victories wore crowns

(*stephanoi*) as symbols of their special situation. The winning dramatic poet, as well as the *chorēgos*, would have been awarded such a crown after the final production. The proclamation was probably made in the name of the winning poet; the opening scene of *Acharnians* (425) shows that the herald formally invited the poet to “bring on your chorus.” Private celebrations followed the public occasion. Plato’s *Symposium* purports to be an account of the party on the night following the actual victory-party, whose participants included two dramatists (**Agathon**, Aristophanes), all very much the worse for wear. Some comic by-play between Aristophanes and a fellow comic poet suggests that victorious poets might appear in triumph, as it were, at the gymnasium. Aristophanes implies that their motive was to pick up star-struck boys, but we do know that the gymnasia were popular gathering-places, where an exuberant victor might well make an appearance.

At *Frogs* 366–7 (405-L) the comic chorus declares certain individuals to be anathema and order that they be excluded from the festival. These include traitors to the state, those who like bad jokes, and: “the politician who nibbles away at the poets’ pay, just because he was made fun of in the ancestral rites of Dionysos.” Clearly the politician in question, identified by the scholiast as Archinos or Agyrrhios, had proposed reducing the *misthos* (“pay”) of the poets, probably because of serious economic constraints. The comic poet interprets this proposal as motivated by personal reasons, but it is good evidence that the poets did receive some financial support from the state. After all, putting on a play or group of plays would be a task of several months and would involve hands-on training of the actors and chorus. A poet or director would need to have recompense for the time required to stage the production. This raises again the question of the extent to which drama was “political” in that it was sponsored by the state.

The Theatrical Space

The classic lines of the theater at Epidauros (see fig. 1.2) will be familiar to many. Set against a stunning natural backdrop and about 90 percent intact, this theater appears regularly and prominently in the standard guides and handbooks about ancient drama. We admire the ornate entrance-ways, the perfectly round *orchestra* (especially when viewed from the air), the mathematical precision of the wedges and rows where the spectators sat, the elaborate and perfectly curved stone benches, and the acoustics by which those in the last row can hear clearly what is said or sung in the center of the *orchestra* (which the modern guide is happy to demonstrate). But this was not the sort of theater that Aeschylus or Aristophanes had at their disposal at Athens in the fifth century. The theater at Epidauros was built in the mid fourth century and was intended to be a state-of-the-art construction. Comparing the theater at Epidauros with that in fifth-century Athens is like a putting a modern domed stadium beside an ivy-clad baseball park or a terraced football ground.

Even when we go to Athens, the remains of the later structures dominate what we see and it is with difficulty that we imagine the layout that playwrights, performers, and spectators had to work with in the fifth century. Today (see fig. 1.1) we see a

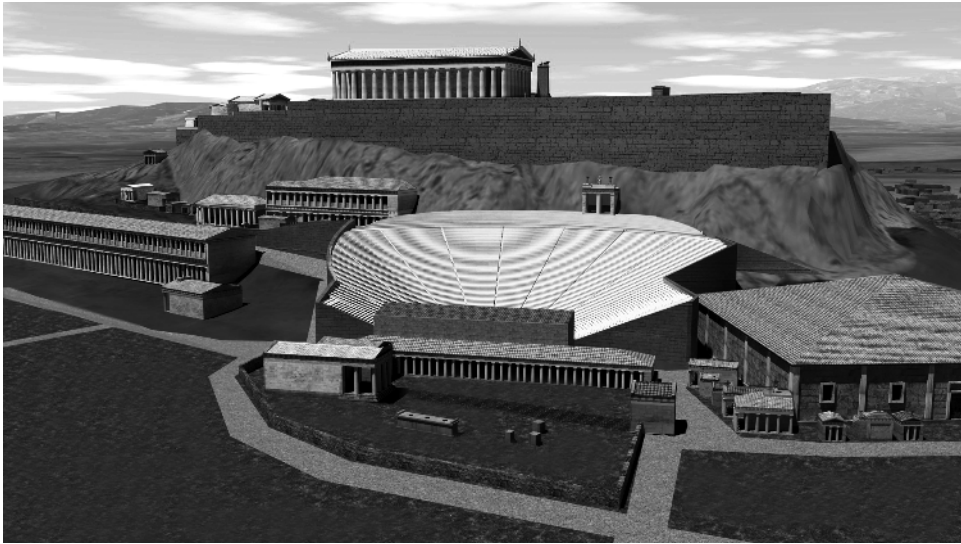


Figure 1.6 *South slope of the Acropolis (artist's reconstruction). Reproduced courtesy of Dimitrios Tsalkalis, www.ancientathens3d.com.*

round *orchēstra*, nicely paved with marble flagstones and surrounded by a stone drainage ditch, curving rows of stone benches with cross-ramps and aisles, elaborate thrones in the front row for the priests of various civic cults, and a massive elevated platform with steps set halfway across the *orchēstra*. All of this postdates the fifth century. Around 330 BC the Athenian statesman Lykourgos had the theater rebuilt in stone and added the lavish touches that we see today. Finally the modern backdrop of the theater is a bustling and busy twenty-first-century metropolis – in classical times the fields and mountains around Athens would have made this a setting surrounded by nature. We have to exercise our imagination to see what was there when the great tragic and comic poets competed in the fifth century.

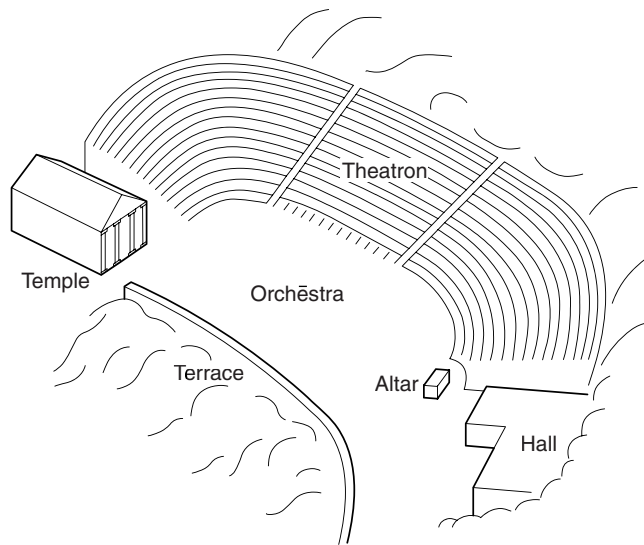
A *theatron* was a “watching space” and in its simplest form consisted of a slope on a hillside with a flat area at the bottom where the performers sang and danced. This flat space was called an *orchēstra* or “dancing place.” In modern usage “orchestra” denotes the lower part of the house or the collection of musicians before or beneath the playing area, but to the Greeks it was the “dancing place.” Scholars seeking a rustic origin for drama suggested that this *orchēstra* developed from the round threshing-floor, on which, it is suggested, country songs and dances were performed after the harvest and threshing were finished. But not all early “dancing floors” were perfectly round and drama seems to have developed in the urban environment at Athens. The theater was located on the south-east slope of the Acropolis, on the opposite side from the *agora*, the center of Athenian daily life. It was next to, but not part of, the area sacred to Dionysos, and we will discuss below whether drama was in any way Dionysian, or merely linked by an accident of geography.

The (late) evidence that we have for the Lenaia suggests that performances at that festival were originally held in the *agora*, where an *orchēstra* and temporary benches were located. When ca. 440 the production of comedy and tragedy at the Lenaia became a formally state-sponsored competition, these will have been moved to the formal theater, although some argue that production continued in the *agora* through to the end of the fifth century. On this theory at least four of Aristophanes' extant eleven comedies were produced in a different venue from that of the comedies at the Dionysia, and indeed some scholars believe that they can detect differences in staging between comedies at the Dionysia and those at the Lenaia. When Dikaiopolis at *Acharnians* 504 insists that "the contest is at the Lenaia," does he mean "at the Lenaia festival" or "in the Lenaia theater"? Probably the former.

The perfectly circular *orchēstra* at Epidauros and its nice semi-circle with elegantly curved stone benches for the spectators have overly influenced our view of the ancient Athenian theater. To begin with, the hollow on the south-east slope of the Acropolis was not a neat semi-circle, although by the Hellenistic and Roman eras such a semi-circle had been created (see map 1.3). A perfect semi-circle provides the best sight-lines for the greatest number and is thus naturally "democratic," and although the lower part of the *theatron* at Athens did surround the *orchēstra* by a little more than 180 degrees, the majority of the spectators were sitting in front of the playing area. On the western side (audience's right) the rows of the *theatron* did not extend to any great degree, and on the audience's left intruded the large Odeion, built by Perikles around 440. Thus in the fifth century dramas would be played more frontally than in a perfectly semi-circular theater.

At *Women at the Thesmophoria* 395 the men are described as "coming straight home from the benches (*ikria*)." Other ancient sources suggest that dramas were originally performed in the *agora* in front of spectators seated on *ikria*, before performances were moved to the south-east slopes of the Acropolis. While it is possible that "benches" was a term carried over from the early performances in the *agora* and that spectators sat merely on the ground itself, we should imagine the spectators of the fifth century seated on something that would have resembled the bleacher seating in high-school gymnasias or beside football fields. Obviously the benches could be arranged in some sort of roughly angled pattern, but the neatly curved rows of seating must await the rebuilding of the theater in stone by Lykourgos in the fourth century. At both Thorikos, a regional deme-theater in the south-east of Attica (see map 1.4), and the fifth-century theater at Argos (see fig. 1.3) the evidence reveals for the most part rows of straight front-facing seating. We have good evidence that the state leased out seating rights and that these costs were recovered by charging spectators for a seat on the benches. Roselli (2011) has suggested attractively that a smaller formal seating area would allow for others to sit farther up on the hillside and thus avoid the formal fee of admission.

Below the spectators extended the *orchēstra*. Most of the Greek theaters that have survived are heavily altered by later developments, one of which was the perfectly circular *orchēstra*. Dörpfeld, the German archaeologist who excavated the area of the Athenian theater in the 1880s, called attention to a series of seven stones arranged (in his view) in an arc. These, he insisted, formed the ring of a circular *orchēstra* some



Map 1.4 *Theater at Thorikos.*

twenty-four meters across, slightly to the south and east of the present *orchēstra*. Some have challenged the findings of Dörpfeld, wondering if the arc existed at all, and argue that the *orchēstra* in theaters of the fifth century was more rectangular or trapezoidal than circular. Certainly the *orchēstra* in the regional deme-theater of Thorikos is hardly circular (map 1.4). But the original songs and dances, the dithyrambs which were still part of the Dionysia in the classical period, were called the “circular choruses.” These employed choruses of fifty men or boys, and the description, “circular chorus,” seem to imply a circular performance space. Tragedy and comedy came later and would have adapted themselves to the traditional space. That a local deme-theater such as that at Thorikos did not have the same features as the theater at Athens is not surprising. Touring companies have always had to adapt down to the local space.

When one enters an ancient theater today, one is drawn, almost magnetically, to the center, and at Epidauros and Athens this spot is marked out by a significant stone. It is often assumed that an altar stood here, although at Thorikos what seems to be the altar lies on the audience’s left of the *orchēstra*. A working altar in the middle would immobilize the central focus for any dramatic action, and there are several places where characters gather around a central point: the tomb of Agamemnon in the first half of *Libation-Bearers*, the statue of Athene in *Eumenides*, the altar of Zeus in *Children of Herakles* around which the sons of Herakles take refuge. This would allow a significant interaction between characters and chorus, the latter circling the central tableau in their dances. To leave the crucial focus unencumbered, a functional altar should be at the side in the theater or in front of the nearby temple of Dionysos.

The earliest theatrical space would have consisted of spectators on the hillside and the playing area below. Indeed the earliest three plays that we have, Aeschylus’

Persians, *Seven*, and *Suppliants*, need only this much space for staging. There is no suggestion of a building in the background and all exits and entrances are made from the sides. To be sure in *Persians* the tomb of the dead king is a physical and visible entity, and at line 681 the ghost of Dareios appears above this tomb, but this can be handled in a number of ways – perhaps by a temporary structure at the back of the *orchēstra* near the drop to the terrace below. Actors and chorus thus originally shared the same performing space, with no area reserved for or associated with the actors separate from the chorus, or with any formal structure at the rear. From the level of the theater the hillside drops to the precinct of Dionysos, and a terrace wall on the south side of the *orchēstra* probably marked that boundary of the playing space.

Characters and chorus can enter the *orchēstra* from either side. At Epidauros (see fig. 1.2) and in other later theaters these entrances (*eisodoi*) are formal structures, with a framed doorway on either side. In the earliest theater characters must have just walked onto the playing-space. At *Clouds* 327 (423 or ca. 418) a character indicates the chorus' arrival "there by the *eisodoi*," which implies more than just a general location but an actual structure. Clearly characters take a while to make their entrance, and would have been visible for some time before they actually set foot in the *orchēstra*. Thus arrivals are generally announced by the chorus or another character on stage:

Chorus: But here is Haimon, last-born of your children. Does he come here upset over the fate of Antigone, his destined bride, grieving for the loss of his marriage? (*Antigone* 626–30)

Orestes: Look, there I see my best of friends, Pylades, running here from Phokis, a welcome sight. (*Orestes* 725–7)

There must have been some dramatic tension between spectators who saw these characters about to enter and the players on stage who remained theatrically unaware of their approach. When a character appears without an introduction (Corinthian messenger in *Oedipus*), spectators may well have wondered who this newcomer was.

By 458 the third element of the Athenian theater has emerged, the *skēnē* building at the rear of the *orchēstra*. Look at the elaborate backdrop to Hellenistic and Roman theaters and the observer sees multi-storied structures in stone with lavish decorations, but at Athens in the fifth century, such was not the case. The word *skēnē* means "booth" or "tent," and here we should imagine not the pup-tent familiar from camping, but something like a pavilion. It would have been a useful place to store stage properties and to allow the actors to change costumes, and may have already served to represent some unseen interior space in the plays. Such a structure would have been a temporary one, for it would not be needed for the "circular choruses" on the opening day of the Dionysia, and the very term *skēnē* ("booth," "tent") suggests something non-elaborate and non-permanent. In Euripides' *Ion* (lines 1128–66) we get a description of the formal pavilion (*skēnai*) which Xouthos has erected for the celebration to introduce his newly found son. At the fourth-century theater in Megalopolis we can see the remains of an alcove on one side, where the *skēnē*-building could be stored and put in place when needed (fig. 1.7).



Figure 1.7 *Theater at Megalopolis.* Photo by Matt Maher. *Skēnē* storage area indicated in left center.

But in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458) we find a formal structure on the far side of the acting area; particularly significant are its door and roof. Characters enter and leave as before by the *eisidoi* on either side of the *orchēstra*, but now the door of the *skēnē* building provides a third formal entrance, used to great effect in *Agamemnon*. As Taplin (1978: 33) puts it well, Klytāimēstra in that play "controls the threshold," and the entrances from and exits to the unknown space beyond the door form a major dramatic device of the first two plays of the *Oresteia*. In two versions of "Orestes' revenge" (*Libation-Bearers*, Sophokles' *Elektra*) the plot turns entirely on how to get into the palace. At some point at Athens in the classical period a small stoa (colonnade) was constructed behind the *skēnē*-building with its back to the theater and would have provided a permanent backdrop for the action. This stoa is usually dated to the rebuilding by Lykourgos in the fourth century, but might be as early as 400.

At Epidauros or at the fourth-century theater at Delphi (fig. 1.8) the remains of stone foundations lie outside the *orchēstra*, but the evidence for the earlier theaters suggests that the *skēnē*-building lay partly within the circle of the *orchēstra*. Otherwise there could be a disjunction of the playing spaces, if the *skēnē* were removed completely from the *orchēstra*. The presence of the *skēnē*-building also makes possible different *foci* for the action – especially true in *Libation-Bearers* (458), where the first half of the drama is played about the tomb of Agamemnon, located in the center of the *orchēstra*, and the second half around the central door in the *skēnē*. As in *Agamemnon* control of this doorway is of essential dramatic importance. In *Frogs* (405), the



Figure 1.8 *Theater at Delphi. Photo by I.C. Storey.*

first part of the play, the adventures of Dionysos en route to the Underworld, is played in the *orchēstra*, with the action shifting to the door to Plouton's palace in the second. In both tragedy and comedy we find formal scenes where a character knocks at a door to gain admittance (in tragedy the disguised Orestes at *Libation-Bearers* 653–67, in comedy at *Frogs* 460–78). Often this request is refused or delayed with dramatically suspenseful or humorous results.

As the fifth-century *skēnē*-building was of wood, we cannot determine its appearance with any accuracy. The dramatic texts themselves may shed some light on what the spectators saw and the performers employed. Although there may have been a tent or shed there in the earliest years of tragedy, a formal structure seems to have been first used around 460. As the watchman who opens *Agamemnon* (458) calls attention first to the palace and then to his position on the roof, it is an attractive conclusion that Aeschylus is highlighting this new aspect of the Athenian theater, perhaps on its very first occasion: “The gods I ask for release from my labours, this year-long watch that I keep lying on top of the palace of Atreus.” Later in the play Klytaimestra will insist that her husband walk into the palace on a blood-red carpet, and then will reappear to compel Cassandra to do so as well. Thus by 458 we can infer for the *skēnē* both a major door and a usable roof and we may add two further playing areas to the *theatron*: the area before the door, and the roof of the *skēnē*.

Fourth-century vases (e.g., fig. 4.2) reveal that this door consisted of a pair of panels opening inward, and in several plays it marks out significantly different worlds for the dramatic action. In *Oresteia* the door hides an unknown area, where characters go to die, while in *Antigone*, the world of death lies off stage down one of the *eisodoi*, leaving the door as the entrance to the safe and ordered world of daily life. In *Ion* the *skēnē* represents the temple of Apollo and characters enter and leave the world of that god of wisdom, although there is an uncomfortable feeling that all is not well inside that temple. In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* the barred doors represent the gates of the Acropolis behind which the women have sealed themselves. The *skēnē* can represent a variety of physical structures: temples (that of Zeus in *Children of Herakles*), sanctuaries (that of Demeter in *Suppliant Women*), palaces (the house of Atreus in *Agamemnon* or Sophokles' *Elektra*, or that in Thebes in *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone*), private houses (that of Herakles in *Herakles* or *Trachinian Women*), a tent (as in *Hecuba* or *Ajax*), and a cave (as in *Philoktetes* or *Cyclops*). Unusual physical settings occur in *Oedipus at Kolonos*, where the door marks the entry to the sacred grove of the Eumenides, and in Euripides' *Elektra*, where Elektra and her "husband" dwell in a country shack, "worthy of some farm labourer or a cow-herd" (252).

How many doors did the *skēnē* have? In Menander's comedy *The Grouch* (316) the speaker of the prologue, the god Pan, identifies three distinct dwellings behind three doors: the sanctuary of the Nymphs in the center, the house of Knemon (the focus of the action), and that of Gorgias. Clearly in the rebuilt theater of the late fourth century (see fig. 1.8) there were three distinct doors of roughly equal importance. But no tragedy of the fifth century needs more than one door, an entrance that can have an immense dramatic significance. But in fifth-century comedy there are instances where more than one door seem to be necessary. In *Clouds* Strepsiades and his son are sleeping outside the house, from which a slave emerges with various items and into which the son departs at line 125. In the midst of all this Strepsiades points out the "think-shop" of Sokrates (93):

Do you see that little door and that small house over there?

The action can be played with only one door, used first as Strepsiades' house and then as the "think-shop" of Sokrates, but some prefer a smaller side-door for Strepsiades' house. Again at 790–815, where Sokrates re-enters his "think-shop" and Strepsiades his own house, the scene plays more easily with more than one door. In *Peace* the goddess is shut up in a cave from which she must be drawn out – this has to be the central door of the *skēnē* – but Trygaios has his own house to which he returns at line 800. In *Eupolis* (F 48) we hear that "three of them live here, each in his own shack." The natural conclusion is that this comedy had three distinct and operative doors.

But if comedy could and did use three doors, why does no extant tragedy seem to? Does it have something to do with the ethos of the genres? We know that there was a gulf in popular and artistic perception between the two. Tragedy almost invariably maintains the dramatic fiction and rarely, if ever, calls attention to itself as an artistic construct, while Old Comedy, at least, regularly punctures the dramatic illusion and

involves the spectators in the action unfolding before them. No tragic poet in the fifth century is ever known to have written comedy, and vice versa. Was the use of one door somehow more solemn or distinguished than the use of three, or the three-door *skēnē* somehow seen as more “comic”? The comedies of the fifth century can, with difficulty, be played with one door, and there are places in the surviving tragedies where more than one door could be used. In *Trojan Women*, for instance, the captives are described as confined “in these buildings,” and “with them Helen.” The central door could suffice for the entries of the chorus (at line 151) and subsequently that of Helen (line 895), but if there were another door available, it might have made good drama to bring Helen out through a different entry.

Certain comic texts suggest that the *skēnē*-building had windows, at which characters could be seen and interact with those in the *orchēstra*. At *Wasps* 317–32 the imprisoned Philokleon sings a song of lament “through the opening” to the chorus of elderly jurors gathered below. At *Assembly-Women* 951–75 a young woman inside the house sings a love duet with her boyfriend outside. Again a window is ideal for the young woman to be seen and heard. Several South Italian vases of the fourth century show figures at windows in what must be scenes from a comic production.

A hotly debated matter is whether a low platform or “stage” lay between the *orchēstra* and the *skēnē*-building. Modern productions at Epidauros routinely employ such a raised platform with wide steps leading up from the *orchēstra* to the *skēnē* itself. In both tragedy and comedy we see an increasing role for the actor at the expense of the chorus, and by the fourth century actors become “stars” in the sense that we understand them. A raised platform, it is argued, reflects that increasing role of the actors and creates their own space apart from that of the chorus for whom the “dancing place” was their natural terrain. But a raised platform against the *skēnē* would hardly have served actors in a theater where the great majority sat above and looked down. Nor do the dramas of the fifth century reveal a marked separation of actors and chorus; in fact they interacted as much as they were separated. In *Agamemnon* the chorus approaches the *skēnē*-door when they hear the death-cries from within; in *Eumenides*, *Suppliant Women*, and *Oedipus at Kolonos* the chorus surrounds a figure taking refuge at the center of the *orchēstra*. In *Eumenides* and *Trojan Women* the chorus enters from the *skēnē*-building, rather than from the side. In *Frogs* Dionysos can race across the *orchēstra* to appeal to his priest in the front row for protection from the monsters (fig. 1.9).

There are some places in comedy where a character is invited to “come up.” In *Knights* the Sausage-Seller has just entered by one of the *eisodoi* and has attracted the attention of the slaves across the *orchēstra* (147–9): “O wonderful sausage-seller, come here, come here, my friend. Come up and show yourself as savior to us and to the city.” Some argue that this means to come up from the *orchēstra* to a raised playing area, and comic scenes on vases of the fourth century show steps leading up to what is clearly a stage, on which there appears the double door of the *skēnē*. If there was a separate raised playing-area at the rear of the *orchēstra* and before the *skēnē*, the steps were few enough and sufficiently wide to allow easy interaction between chorus and actors. On the other hand, “up” may mean only dramatically “up.” “Come up” can



Figure 1.9 *Throne of the Priest of Dionysos Eleuthereus. Photo by I.C. Storey.*

work equally well as “come up onto this platform where we are” or just “come forward to the focus of attention.”

Recent studies in theater production have shown that the crucial area for performance in an ancient theater, either by a chorus or by an actor, was the line that connects the center of the *orchēstra* to the central door of the *skēnē*. An actor in the front half of the *orchēstra* does not command the *theatron* visually or audibly as effectively as one farther back. This is precisely the area that a raised stage, if one existed in the fifth century, would have occupied, but modern theorists insist that such a stage is not necessary for effective production.

The roof of the *skēnē* was called the *theologeion* (“god-speaking place”), from which one might assume that its primary use was for the advent of deities, either at the start or close of the drama. But the first character that we know of to appear on the roof is a watchman at the start of *Agamemnon*, and other scenes confirm the presence of humans on the roof:

Menelaos: Look. What is this? I see the glow of torches, and these people taking refuge on the roof, and a sword held at my daughter’s throat. (*Orestes* 1573–5)

That in this scene at least four figures are gathered on the roof tells us something about the size of the *skēnē*-building in 408. Not all gods in drama will have appeared on the roof, but when a character tells others to “look up” at an apparition, the natural conclusion is that this apparition is on the roof of the *skēnē*:

Chorus: Look. Do you feel the same pulse of fear, seeing such an apparition above the house? (*Herakles* 816–17)

Obviously, then, the roof was accessible from the rear by a ladder or wooden stairs, but since many of the spectators would be looking down on the dramatic tableau, the advent of a character on the roof would take only the players and those in the lower rows by surprise. Such a suspension of realism was part of the dramatic conventions of the Athenian theater.

The ancient theater did not depend on “special effects” or the creation of reality in its productions. But two devices can be documented for the extant plays from the fifth century. First there was what is commonly called the *ekkyklēma* (“wheel out”), although that term is not found until very late sources. When comedy refers to such a scene, the verb *ekkyklein* is normally used. This was a wheeled device that could be rolled through the double doors in the *skēnē*, on which could be represented interior scenes *en tableau*. One ancient source describes its purpose as follows: “It would show things which appear to be happening indoors, e.g. in a house, to those outside as well (I mean the spectators).” One of its primary uses was to display those who had died within the *skēnē*-building. One such instance is found at *Hippolytos* 808–10 where Theseus calls for the doors to be opened:

Theseus: Servants, release the bars of the gate, unfasten the locks, so that I may see the bitter sight of my wife, who in her death has destroyed me.

Another occurs at *Herakles* 1028–30:

Chorus: Ah, ah, look. The double doors of the high-roofed house are opening. See the poor children lying in front of their ill-starred father.

It seems then that the use of the *ekkyklēma* was announced and that the spectators prepared to accept this fairly blatant stage convention. Modern critics suggest all sorts of scenes that might have been staged with the *ekkyklēma*, but unless we are alerted in some way by the text, it seems safer to restrict its use.

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (458) presents an interesting problem here. Two display-scenes occur in *Agamemnon* (1372) and *Libation-Bearers* (973), where first Klytaimestra and then Orestes stands over the bodies of their victims. Here it is often assumed that these tableaux were staged on the *ekkyklēma*, while for *Eumenides*, the third play of this trilogy of 458, it has been suggested that some or all of the chorus of sleeping Furies enters through the *skēnē*-door on the *ekkyklēma*. Thus the *ekkyklēma* was part of the *skēnē*-building from the start, but some doubt that the *ekkyklēma* existed so early and object that we get no advance warning of an interior scene as we do in the examples

cited above. Perhaps announcing the use of the *ekkyklēma* was a convention that developed later in the century. If the chorus in *Eumenides* did enter in this fashion through the *skēnē*-door, then the wheeled platform was large and solid enough to carry twelve choristers plus the chairs on which they were slumped.

Comedy had great fun with the *ekkyklēma*. Tragedy required the spectators to suspend their disbelief and accept the dramatic illusion, especially when a potentially noisy device such as the *ekkyklēma* was employed. Comedy, on the other hand, reveled in disrupting the dramatic illusion, and would consciously call attention to the technique. Thus in *Acharnians* and *Women at the Thesmophoria* a tragic poet is “wheeled out” on the *ekkyklēma* in a self-conscious piece of theater:

Dikaiopolis: Euripides, dear sweet Euripides, hear me, if you have ever listened to any man. It's me, Dikaiopolis of Cholleidai, calling you.

Euripides: I don't have time.

Dikaiopolis: So wheel yourself out.

Euripides: No, I can't.

Dikaiopolis: Please.

Euripides: All right, I'll wheel myself out. (*Acharnians* 403–9)

What better way to call attention to the fact that the *ekkyklēma* is but an accepted convention than to bring a tragic poet on stage by that means?

The other piece of stage equipment is known as the *mēchanē* ('machine'), also known as the *geranos* ("crane") or *kradē* ("branch"). This was a device firmly anchored behind the *skēnē*-building, with a system of winch and pulleys, a wooden beam, and a harness by which characters could be presented as though flying through or hovering in the air. This device has given birth to our familiar phrase *deus ex machina* ("god from the machine"). A variety of suggestions has been offered to explain how the *mēchanē* worked. One ancient source talks of raising the *mēchanē* like a finger, and from the comic evidence (*Peace*, *Birds*) it is clear that a character could be raised from behind the *skēnē* to land in front. Thus the *mēchanē* could both raise and swivel. To modern eyes such a device with its visible cables and creaking machinery might seem hostile to the serious ethos of tragedy, but spectators were willing to participate by suspending belief, and those who enjoyed spectacle would eagerly await such a dramatic end to the play.

Comedy has fun with this dramatic device as well. *Clouds* has a famous scene in which Sokrates enters suspended from the *mēchanē* – “I am treading air and looking down on the Sun” (225). In *Peace* the *mēchanē* becomes a giant dung-beetle on which the main character Trygaios is carried to Olympos – a parody of Euripides' lost tragedy *Bellerophon*. In *Women at the Thesmophoria*, a play-length burlesque of Euripidean tragedy, Euripides himself enters at line 1098 on the *mēchanē* disguised as Perseus (from his recent *Andromeda*), while at 1199 *Birds* Iris flies in on the *mēchanē* to land at the newly founded city of Cloudcuckooland. Comedy thus uses the *mēchanē* to puncture the bubble of seriousness that surrounded its use in tragedy.

How large a load could the *mēchanē* bear? Usually only one person appears, and in cases where two deities appear above (Poseidon and Athene in *Trojan Women*, Iris and Madness in *Herakles*), an equally good case can be made for an epiphany on the roof. But in *Orestes*, Apollo and Helen certainly appeared on the *mēchanē*, and the two

Dioskouroi were swung onto the *skēnē*-roof in Euripides' *Elektra*. That the *mēchanē* was certainly used for Pegasos, for the world's largest dung-beetle, and a chariot for a god (in *Medea*) show that the device could be dressed up to accommodate more than a single human figure.

The first certain use of the *mēchanē* seems to have been in Euripides' *Medea* (431). It was used principally at the close of tragedies, often for the appearance of a deity to resolve or pronounce upon the action down below. But humans could and did appear on the *mēchanē* – Bellerophon entered upon Pegasos in two lost plays of Euripides, and at the end of *Medea* the heroine appears on the chariot of the Sun to spirit herself and the bodies of her children away. It is not always easy to determine whether a god at the end of a tragedy appears on the *skēnē*-roof or on the *mēchanē*. The presence of a chariot or the associations of motion should suggest an appearance on the *mēchanē*. Thus at *Andromache* 1225–30:

Chorus: Oh, oh, what is moving? What divinity is it I see? Look, see! This is a god that is carried through the bright sky and is landing on the horse-rearing plains of Phthia.

we may reasonably conclude that Thetis enters on the *mēchanē* and lands on the *thēologeion*. So too the Dioskouroi at *Elektra* 1230 move toward and light upon the palace. At times the deity might appear either on the *mēchanē* or upon the roof, e.g. Athene at the end of *Ion*, *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, and *Suppliant Women*, and the Dioskouroi in *Helen*. Perhaps when no attention is called to the actual arrival, we might infer an appearance on the roof rather than on the *mēchanē*.

One extraordinary scene in tragedy from the very late career of Euripides presents the simultaneous use of four performance-spaces. At the end of *Orestes* (1549–693), a brilliantly iconoclastic tragedy in a number of ways, the ancient spectators would have seen the chorus in their usual area (*orchēstra*), Menelaos and his followers hammering at the door of the *skēnē*-building, Orestes and others on the roof, and then on the *mēchanē* Apollo and the now-deified Helen. All four possible areas of performance were in use at the same time, and in the brief space of fifteen lines someone from each area will speak.

The Performance

We shall concentrate principally on the performances at the Dionysia, since it was the earliest dramatic competition, the one that likely carried the greater prestige, and the one about which we are best informed. The Dionysia was a five-day holiday, that was both religious (honoring the god Dionysos with appropriate parades and festivities) and civic, as it involved the ancient city as a whole in its observation. As mentioned above, the assembly would not meet, nor was normal business conducted, at least for the first day – indeed if the theater held at least 15,000 spectators (as some estimate), a good proportion of those engaged in daily business would be at the theater rather than in the *agora*. Thus the spectators were in one sense worshippers of Dionysos, a god honored by wine and a general sense of freedom, members of the

male citizen-body of Athens (there were also metics, foreign visitors, boys, and probably slaves and women), all full of the sense of the occasion and in search of entertainment and emotional diversion. One of the principal problems in the modern study of Greek drama is assessing the extent to which drama was a religious offering, an exploration of political identity, or an engaging piece of popular entertainment.

Plato speaks of dramas performed before 30,000 spectators, but even the largest of the ancient theaters (those at Megalopolis, Syracuse, and Ephesos) could not have held much more than 20,000. But even 12–15,000 spectators is an audience on a large scale, and thus the modern counterpart to the ancient theater is not the enclosed interior of a darkened hall, but the outdoor football stadium with all the dynamics of the large crowd. The usual entrance to the theater was from the east along the Street of the Tripods (see map 1.2), which wound its way from the *agora* around the north and east slopes of the Acropolis, past the Odeion of Perikles into the *theatron*. At *Acharnians* 26 the main character (Dikaiopolis) imagines the arrival of citizens in the assembly as filling up that space (the Pnyx, on a hill west of the Acropolis) from the top down, but unless there was a separate route around the north side of the Odeion, spectators would enter and fill the *theatron* from the bottom up. Spectators would thus enter the theater by the same *eisodos* that the players themselves would use.

In the later theaters of the Hellenistic and the Roman periods the *theatron* was divided by vertical aisles and at least one horizontal walkway (*diazōma*), creating the neat regular wedges of seating (*kerkides*) that are the hallmark of the ancient theater (see fig. 1.6). But in the fifth century the arrangements must have been far less formal, as spectators sat in benches and perhaps above on the hillside. The audience was principally composed of citizen males – comedy regularly addresses the spectators as *andres* (“men”), and on a couple of occasions the spectators are sub-divided into classes of males:

Now that you’ve enjoyed our triumph over that troublesome old man, youths, boys, men, applaud generously. (*The Grouch* 794)

. . . while I explain the plot to the boys, the young men, the grown men, the older men, and the very old men. (*Peace* 50–3)

Elsewhere a character in *Eupolis* (F 261) complains of a “frigid joke, only the boys are laughing,” and in *Clouds* Aristophanes accuses his vulgar rivals of bringing characters on stage with dangling red *phalloi* “so as to get a laugh out of the boys” (538–9). Thus we may assume with confidence that boys did attend the theater.

Passages from Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* (425) confirm the presence of foreigners at the theater. According to the main character, Kleon (a leading political demagogue) claimed that in a play at the Dionysia of the previous year, usually identified as Aristophanes’ *Babylonians*, Aristophanes had “said bad things about the city of Athens in the presence of foreigners (*xenoi*).” But now at *Acharnians* 504–8:

The contest is that at the Lenaia, and foreigners are not yet here. The tribute is not coming in, nor allies from the cities. We are here by ourselves, clean-hulled (so to speak), for I consider the metics to be the bran of our population.

We know also that metics were allowed to act as *chorēgoi* at the Lenaia and to perform in the choruses. But these were resident aliens and permanent members of the Athenian community, not full citizens admittedly, but men with a real stake in the life and prosperity of the city. As one of the preliminaries at the Dionysia was the presentation of the *phoros* (tribute), we may imagine that at that festival there would be a considerable number of visitors from the cities of the empire in attendance. By the end of March the sailing season had resumed and people would be able to travel to Athens.

But what about women? Could (did) women attend the theater in the fifth century? The issue has been hotly debated to no accepted conclusion. Ancient Athens was a male-dominated society – only males could vote in the *ekklēsia* and hold political office within the state – and much of the evidence, admittedly from upper-class sources, suggests that women lived in a sort of seclusion like that which we associate with certain Middle Eastern societies today. But women did have a public role within the state, both as tradespersons in the *agora* and principally in the area of what we would call “religion.” Women held priesthoods, attended festivals – the Thesmophoria was a women’s only festival, the Adonia very much a women’s celebration, and the main character in *Lysistrata* complains (1–3):

If they’d invited the women to the shrine of Dionysos, to that of Pan or one of the gods of love and passion, no-one could have got through the streets – tambourines everywhere.

Since the dramatic competitions were part of a religious festival (that of Dionysos), then why should women have been excluded or felt excluded from what was in part a religious observance? On the other side of the coin is the argument that the dramatic festivals were more civic and “political” occasions than religious festivals at which women would be inappropriate visitors.

Plato, writing in the fourth century, talks of tragedy as “a kind of rhetoric addressed to boys, women and men, slaves and free citizens without distinction,” and imagines in his ideal state that “people will not be eager to allow tragic poets to put their stages in the market-place and perform before women and children and the public at large” (*Gorgias* 502d). Elsewhere he argues that while older children prefer comedy, adult males and women of culture would choose tragedy. These passages suggest that in Plato’s time women were a natural and recognizable part of the audience. On the other hand, the comic passages mentioned above address only the males. If women did attend in the fifth or fourth century, perhaps they were present only in small numbers and seated in less prominent seating. Alexis F 42 describes women having to sit “in the last wedge of seats.” Henderson (1991: 144) postulates “a normative distinction between a notional audience of men (political) and an actual audience that included women (festive).”

Other evidence from comedy is susceptible of opposing interpretations. In *Women at the Thesmophoria* (389–91, 395–7) a woman complains about Euripides’ treatment of women in his tragedies:

Where has he not slandered us women, in any venue where there are spectators and tragic choruses . . . as soon as our husbands come home from the benches they give us searching looks and immediately start looking for our secret lovers.

On the surface this implies that women were not normally at the theater; on the other hand the women seem awfully well informed about how Euripides treats women in his plays. We should probably not treat this as an actual “window” into Athenian life, but rather a contrived situation for comic effect. Another passage from Aristophanes *Peace* (962–7) has been used both to support and reject the presence of women among the spectators

Trygaios: Toss some barley-corns (*krithai*) to the spectators. Slave: Okay.
 Trygaios: You’ve already given them out? Slave: By Hermes, yes, I have. And there’s no spectator who doesn’t have a barley-corn (*krithē*).
 Trygaios: The women don’t have any. Slave: But the men will give them some tonight.

This passage is often interpreted that the women were sitting at the back of the *theatron*, where the barley-corns thrown by a slave would not have reached. But the word *krithē* (“barely-corn”) is also a slang term for the male penis, and the passage might read:

Trygaios: Toss some barley-corns (*krithai*) to the spectators. Slave: Okay.
 Trygaios: You’ve already given them out? Slave: By Hermes, yes, I have. And there’s no spectator who doesn’t have a barley-corn (*krithē*).
 Trygaios: But women don’t have any. Slave: But the men will give them one tonight (nudge, nudge; wink, wink).

The whole business is a set-up, then, for the double meaning of *krithē* and is not solid evidence for the presence of women in the theater.

The spectators were given food and drink before and during the play. The fourth-century historian Philochoros claims that “throughout the whole event wine was poured out for them and snacks provided,” while Aristotle observes that “people who munch snacks in the theater do this especially when the acting is bad.” We can cite also the passage from *Peace* quoted above, as well as the prologue of *Wasps* where Aristophanes announces that his play will not have a pair of slaves throwing nuts out to the audience – the point being that his comedy will succeed on its dramatic merits, not through a largesse from the *chorēgos*. In *Wealth* (388) a pair of characters toy with the spectators, first promising to toss out fruit and nuts and then refusing on the grounds that such behavior “is not proper for a comic poet” (797–8).

The orators tell us that the Athenian court-room was a noisy and contentious affair, and we can imagine that the Athenian theater was much the same. Evidence from the fourth century describes spectators hissing and clucking at unpopular actors or poor performances, perhaps even hurling food to express discontent, and applauding wildly when pleased. One anecdote records that a controversial line from Euripides’ lost *Aiolos* aroused the spectators’ wrath, another that his *Danae* was stopped by an outraged audience and only resumed after the playwright urged them to see what would happen to the offending character. These may, however, just be fictions created after the fact as part of the stereotypical picture of Euripides as the *enfant terrible* of the Athenian stage. But the theater was a communal experience, with spectators sitting in

close proximity, able to pick up and transmit the emotional impulses that the performances would generate, be they the sadness and grief from tragedy or the exuberance and laughter of comedy. For Aristotle (*Poetics* chapter 6) the end of tragedy was the creation and *katharsis* of pity and fear, and we need to be reminded that the theater in classical Athens was not a detached cerebral exercise, but a shared emotional experience. We even know of a theatrical security force, called the *rhabdouchoi* (literally “rod-bearers”) whose duties seem to have included maintaining order in the *theatron*.

By the middle of the fourth century the Athenians had established the “Theoric Fund” (from the *thea-* root, “watch”) that allowed poorer Athenians to attend the theater by paying the two-obol admission fee. When this was introduced is a matter of controversy. It was clearly in place by the 340s when Demosthenes refers directly to the fund, but some of the sources attribute its introduction to Perikles in the third quarter of the fifth century, and another to the politician Agyrrhios in the 390s, although this last is probably a confusion with Agyrrhios’ institution of pay for attendance at the assembly.

Two obols was a reasonably high cost to attend the theater. Some recent critics have argued that in the fifth century this high cost of admission would have affected the composition of the audience, so that only those sufficiently well off could attend. This, it is suggested, explains the right-wing bias of Old Comedy – they were performing for the elite and not for a representative general public. But Roselli’s (2011) suggestion that many Athenians could have occupied the hillside above the benches allows for a larger attendance for the dramas. There was some reserved seating (*proedria*): for public officials such as the *Boulē* (the council of 400 Athenians; at *Peace* 887, 905–6, and *Birds* 794 specific reference is made to separate seating for the *Boulē*), the archons, the ten generals, and the *nomophylakes* (“guardians of the laws”), for those being specially honored, and the *ephēboi* (young men doing their military service).

Conventions of the space

First it was a large space. Wiles (2000: 109) estimates that from the central door in the *skēnē* to the furthest row in the *theatron* was a distance of about 100 meters. Thus the sort of intimate performance that we associate with small theaters or even the close-up of the movie camera was not possible in the ancient theater. To a spectator seated at the back those performing below would seem only a few inches high. Thus there could not be a vast horde of speaking characters and the actors would need to be dressed distinctively to make them and their roles stand out, especially since they were masked and it might not be readily apparent who was speaking.

The theater was also a large communal space. Several thousand spectators were crowded into a restricted space, whether on benches, the later marble rows, or on the hillside. Thus the experience of attending the Greek theater may not have been that of individuals responding as individuals to the performance set before them, but of a community of spectators reacting *en masse* to the horror or the humor played out for them. Wiles (2000: 112) puts it powerfully:

The spectator 100 metres away was part of a single crowd, bounded by a space that created no vertical or horizontal boundaries, and concealed no group from the rest. If all 15,000-plus tightly packed people were listening to the same words at the same time, and shared the same broad response, the power of emotion generated would have been quite unlike that created today in a studio theater. Communication was effected not simply via light and sound waves but via an osmosis passing through the bodies of the spectators.

It was also an open space. Performances took place in the daytime, probably not long after daybreak – several plays call attention to the rising of the sun (e.g. *Antigone*, a poignant touch if this play were the first of its group). One would be aware of both the natural surroundings, the view over the south-east part of the city and thence out to the hills of the Mesogaia, and of the other spectators, the citizen-body of Athens and their visitors. Modern outdoor stadia are usually built to direct the spectators' view inwards towards the playing area and do not distract with a view of the natural setting, but for the Greeks *theatron* and natural background formed a harmony of setting and took the spectator from the individual drama unfolding below to the larger world of the natural environment. When gods appear at the end of a Greek play, their arrival could seem quite natural in light of the larger universe that surrounded the theater. In *Clouds* the spectators' attention is specifically directed out to the mountains and then back to the *theatron*.

The theatrical space formed also a community of the audience. Actors come into and go from the common space in front of and surrounded by the spectators and very often announce what has happened either off stage or behind the *skēnē*. There is an "outer" common world of the spectators and an "inner" world between which there are doorways of communication. The words of the drama bring the events of the unseen worlds before the spectators and through the brilliance of the writing they are able to imagine what has happened elsewhere. Very often we see a character leave the acting area and then a messenger picks up what happened when they arrived in the unseen world. Doors swing both ways in Greek drama.

"Theater of the mind"

This is Taplin's (1978: 9) useful phrase to describe the conventions of the Greek stage. Modern audiences are used to the creation of reality in front of them; they expect visual and aural effects that make the dramatic atmosphere "real" and believable. Much is written about the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the spectator, and impressive and realistic effects do much to enable that suspension. We are used to the box theater, where we view the on-stage action through an open fourth wall, although modern thrust theaters, such as that at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, have created a more involved effect for that audience. In the Greek theater the spectators had to do much of the work themselves, to imagine places and settings, import information and relationships from the mythical tradition, visualize in their minds the events occurring off stage and narrated by others.

There were no programs with a list of characters and actors, the settings of the various acts and scenes, and the background information necessary for appreciating

the performance before a word was spoken. For the Dionysia there was the *proagōn* (“precontest”) just before the Dionysia itself, at which playwrights with their actors and chorus would announce in some fashion the subject of the forthcoming production, but in the case of comedy these probably tantalized and misled more than they informed. The words of the text told the spectators what they needed to know: where they were, who the characters were, and the elements of the plot-line that would develop. Take the opening of Euripides’ *Bacchae* for instance:

To this land of Thebes am I come, the son of Zeus, Dionysos, to whom once Semele, the daughter of Kadmos, gave birth with the lightning-bolt for midwife. Having exchanged my divine appearance for mortal form, I stand beside the streams of Dirke and the water of Ismenos. Over there near the palace I see the tomb of my mother who was struck by thunder and the ruins of her house still smoking with the flame of Zeus’ fire, the undying outrage of Hera against my mother.

Here the speaker tells us that we are before the palace at Thebes, that he is Dionysos disguised as a mortal, that his mother Semele gave him birth after being struck by the bolt of Zeus, and that the play will deal with the story of his return to Thebes.

To take an example from comedy, where the spectators would not know the background to the story, examine the opening lines of Menander’s *The Grouch*:

Now imagine, people, that the setting lies in Attica, at Phyle, and that the shrine of the Nymphs that I am coming out of is that of the people of Phyle and those who farm the rocky ground here – it’s a well-known place. In the farm-house on my right here lives Knemon, a real misanthrope . . . who never speaks to anyone first, except when he passes my shrine (I’m the god Pan).

Here the spectators learn the setting (Phyle on the rocky outskirts of Attica); the identity of the speaker (Pan); the space behind the central door (a shrine of the Nymphs); and the name, domicile, and personality of the main character (Knemon the *dyskolos*, “grouch”).

Very often the text announces the imminent arrival and identity of a character. Thus at *Antigone* 162 the chorus prefaces Kreon’s entry, “But here comes Kreon, the new ruler of the country,” and later Kreon’s son Haimon, Antigone’s betrothed, is announced in similar terms, “Here is Haimon, the last-born of your sons” (626). In the same play the entry of Kreon’s wife is announced at line 1180, and the return of Kreon himself at line 1260. On these occasions the spectators need to know who this figure is approaching along an *eisodos*. Sometimes a character arrives without introduction, but the audience is rarely kept in doubt. In *Antigone* Teiresias arrives without fanfare at line 988, but in a play set at Thebes the identity of a blind man walking with the aid of a boy would be obvious – just to be sure Kreon calls him “old Teiresias” at line 991. In *Alkestis* Herakles appears unexpectedly at line 476, but his traditional accoutrements of lion-skin and club will make his identity clear and at line 478 the chorus makes it abundantly so, “Admetos is indeed at home, Herakles.”

By the time of fourth-century comedy, the *eisodoi* had acquired distinct identities, that to the spectators’ right leading to a local scene, and that to the left a foreign

setting. Combined with the entrance via the *skēnē*, these could allow for some “mis-direction” on the poet’s part. The spectators, expecting an entry from one side, would be surprised either by a character entering via a different entry or by an unexpected development. Such a moment occurs at line 924 of *Oedipus Tyrannos*. At the end of the previous scene Oedipus and Jokaste have sent for the herdsman who survived the encounter where three roads meet. A messenger has been dispatched through the local *eisodos*, while the chorus sings the second *stasimon* (863–910), and Jokaste reappears through the *skēnē*-door to make an offering at the statue of Apollo (911–22). She, the chorus, and spectators will be watching the local *eisodos* for the expected herdsman, but from the other *eisodos* without warning or announcement enters the messenger from Corinth to take the plot in an unforeseen direction.

The spectators are often prepared for the identity and entry of the chorus. In tragedy they normally enter from one of the *eisodoi* after an introductory scene (or scenes) involving the actor(s), but in two early plays by Aeschylus (*Persians*, *Suppliants*), they are already in the *orchestra* when the action begins. Twice in the extant tragedies they enter through the *skēnē*-door, in *Eumenides* (perhaps on the *ekkyklēma*) and in *Trojan Women*, where the *skēnē* represents the tents in which the captive women are being held. Choral identities in tragedy are not that unusual, e.g. elders of the state, handmaidens, townfolk, and thus their identity is not always specifically announced. But at lines 55ff. of the prologue of *Bacchae* mentioned above, Dionysos prepares the spectators for the entry of the chorus of his female followers from the East. In Old Comedy, where the entire situation is composed *de nouveau*, the spectators are always told something about the chorus before they enter, as at *Acharnians* 178–85:

I was hurrying here bearing peace treaties for you, when some old Acharnians sniffed them out . . . I ran away, but they’re following me and shouting

or at *Wasps* 214–16:

But they’ll be here soon, his fellow-jurors, to summon out my father.

In the eleven surviving comedies of Aristophanes the chorus invariably enters along the *eisodos*, often rushing violently on stage – as at *Knights* 247, “get him, get him, get the villain.” By the time of Menander (late fourth century) the chorus enters to sing interludes between the acts, and in an early play (*The Grouch*) their identity and arrival are announced to the spectators:

I see some worshippers of Pan heading this way, and they’ve been drinking. I think it’s a good time for me to get out of here. (230–2)

Choros is related to the Greek verb *choreuein* (“to dance”). Again modern usage gets in the way, since for us a chorus is a singing group or the refrain of a song. But Greek drama must have been more balletic than our modern theater. We should perhaps look to the Broadway or West End musical for a modern analogue to Greek drama. Clearly certain forms of dance will have suited certain dramatic situations – we know

of a war dance, an “Athena-dance,” the vulgar comic *kordax*, the distinctive *sikinnis* in satyr-drama, and at the end of *Wasps* the main character engages in a vigorous dancing-contest with Karkinos and his sons. It is easy enough for us to envisage dance as part of a romantic or comic musical, but it takes more effort to imagine how the more serious form of tragedy would have incorporated dance. Scenes of mourning and lamentation will have had their own particular physical expression. We can imagine the chorus in *Oedipus at Kolonos* miming the off-stage battle with movements of a martial turn, all the more effective if these were older men. In *Eumenides* the chorus of Furies track and surround the fugitive Orestes, encircling him with a binding song of enchantment. We can only imagine the power that the dance of the Angry Goddesses would have evoked. There may not be much “action” in a Greek tragedy, but an impressive effect was created by the emotive spectacle of the dance.

We tend to see the chorus as operating on the sidelines of the action, commenting (sometimes with banality) on the exchange between the actors, as at *Antigone* 724–5:

My lord, if he is saying something to the point, you should pay attention to him, and he to you, since good arguments have been made on both sides.

But later in *Antigone* (1099–1101) they take the unusual step of advising the main character on what to do:

Kreon: What then should I do? Tell me and I will do what you say.

Chorus: Go and let the maiden out of her cave-prison and prepare burial for the dead man lying out there.

Ironically Kreon performs these acts in the wrong order and thus brings about the final tragedies. In *Libation-Bearers* the chorus, again unusually, intervene in the action to prevent Aigisthos from bringing his body-guards with him (770–3). But in some plays they have a principal role, when it is their fate on which the action depends, as in Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* and *Eumenides* and in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. In comedy the chorus is often antagonistic to the main character and especially in *Birds* will be openly hostile. On a couple of occasions the chorus must be converted as a result of the contest (*agōn*) and their sympathy and attitude change.

In an **episode** they will use the normal Attic (Athenian) dialect and their speech is no different from that of the actors. When they process into the *orchestra*, often to the accompaniment of the **anapestic** meter (⊔ ⊔ –), again they chant in the usual Attic dialect. But when they perform a standing-song (*stasimon*) or engage in a lyric exchange with a character (*kommos*), their language switches to a quasi-Doric dialect, an artificial construct which would have sounded different to the audience. This has to do in part with the fact that the tradition of choral poetry is **Dorian** (certainly non-Attic), and thus it was perhaps expected that “song” should sound differently from “speech” (remember that the episodes were in verse, but **iambic** trimeter, according to Aristotle, is the closest rhythm to normal speech). Similarly the characters, when they engage in song with the chorus, with another actor, or on their own, sing in this artificial dialect. At *Alkestis* 244–6, part of a dialogue between

the dying Alkestis and her distraught husband in which she sings in Doric lyrics and he responds in less emotive (and Attic) iambics, Alkestis begins: *Hālie kai phaos hāmerās ouraniai te dinai nephelās dromaiou*, which in Attic should have run *Hēlie kai phōs hēmerās ouraniai te dinai nephelēs dromaiou*. Not a huge difference, and certainly understandable to the spectators, but carrying the flavor of the Doric dialect and the connotation of “song.”

Comic choruses sing less often in this artificial Doric, and when they do (as at *Birds* 1058–70), the effect is deliberately to evoke a higher style than the lower norm of comedy. Aristophanes can certainly write in the Doric style. The opening words of the Pindaric poet at *Birds* 904–6 belong to this lyric tradition, but here too the intent is parody of the loftier form. In the entry-songs of the chorus in *Clouds* (276–90, 299–313) the clouds do lapse into Doric on a couple of occasions.

The performers

The choristers were usually Athenian males, and those serving in a chorus were spared military service during the period of rehearsal. At the Lenaia metics could participate for that festival only. The competitions at the Dionysia would require ten men’s dithyrambic choruses of fifty each, three tragic choruses of twelve or fifteen each, and five comic choruses at twenty-four each. Add to this ten boys’ choruses again at fifty each, and we get a total of nearly 1100 performers, although one might consider the possibility that a dithyrambic performer might also appear in a dramatic chorus. We would like to know how large was the body of performers available. If the pool of performers were small, then the relationship between performer and spectator would be one of “us” and “them,” the former doing something that an “average” Athenian did not do. But if performing was something more widespread – just as most Welshmen, it seems, can sing – then spectators would be familiar with the experience and technique and perhaps be more drawn into the details of performance. Since choristers would have to perform in the three tragedies as well as play satyrs in the satyr-drama that followed, acting in tragedy would be a major undertaking and presumably carried more than a little prestige.

The chorus of tragedy was originally twelve in number – this is made clear at Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1348–71) where the chorus disintegrates into twelve distinct individuals – and was allegedly increased to fifteen by Sophokles. However, a late-fifth-century inscription (*IG* i³ 969) from the Rural Dionysia at Anagyros records a *chorēgia* by a Sokrates (not the philosopher) and a victory by Euripides. A further fourteen *tragōidoi* (“performers in tragedy”) are then listed. This does not fit a chorus of fifteen, but can be explained if the *didaskalos* (Euripides) and two others performed as actors and the other twelve as choristers. Complicating the matter is the Pronomos Vase (see fig. 3.1) which shows only eleven choristers costumed as satyrs. Some ancient sources describe the chorus entering in three files, with the outside file, that closest to the spectators, regarded as the most important and its leader considered the chorus-leader. How the chorus performed in their standing-songs (*stasima*) is a matter of debate. They may have performed in three ranks facing out into the *theatron*; this

would suit production in theaters without the circular *orchēstra*. Possibly they danced in a ring around the *orchēstra*, much in the manner that Greeks dance in the round today. Supporting this interpretation is the nomenclature of the parts of a choral song: *strophē* and *antistrophē*, “turn” and “counter-turn,” and the origin of tragedy in the dithyramb or “circular choruses.” Perhaps an originally circular style of performance was augmented or superseded by other formations. Comedy required a larger chorus of twenty-four choristers, and thus would operate with twice the space and manpower, probably producing a more crowded and impressive, if less elegant, spectacle. In at least two comedies, and probably in many more, a pair of opposing half-choruses was employed: old men and old women in *Lysistrata*, rich and poor men in Eupolis’ *Marikas*. In both plays we know that the chorus divided and came together again as they play progressed.

Actors were assigned in some way to the productions, perhaps by lot, perhaps by the choice of the *chorēgos* or the poet. It would be revealing to know how much choice the poet had in his actors. Ancient sources suggest that originally the poet played the lead role in his drama and that Sophokles, having a weak voice, was the first to abandon the acting role. More than one scholar has suggested that Aristophanes himself played the lead role in *Acharnians*, where the personae of the comic poet and his chief character merge at least twice – and also in *Wasps* where Bdelykleon seems to speak for Aristophanes at lines 650–1. It would be appropriate for Aristophanes to play a character called “Loathe-Kleon.”

While some of Aeschylus’ early plays can be performed with two actors, three speaking actors were the norm in classical tragedy. A case can be made for the same number in comedy, although some scenes would make considerable demands on a third actor, involving rapid changes of costume and swift exit through one *eisodos* to return by a different entrance. There are a couple of places in Aristophanes where four speaking actors seem to be required, but in one of these (the scene of decision in *Frogs*) the text is confused because of revision. The extant remains of Menander do not require more than three actors at any point.

Actors’ dress and costume varied widely among the three dramatic genres. Unlike comedy and satyr-drama, we do not have many visual representations of a tragic performer. For the fifth-century two vases now in Boston and Ferrara show tragic performers dressing for their roles (fig. 1.10; see cover figure), while a fragment of a vase from Taras splendidly illustrates the dress and mask of a tragic actor in the fourth century (fig. 1.11). Many vases are clearly influenced by tragedy, but these do not show masked or costumed actors or a performance in any sense. They give us a tragic scene, sometimes a collage of scenes, but with the conventional dress (or lack of it) of Greek heroic art. The Pronomos Vase (see fig. 3.1) shows actors in a satyr-drama, but these plays were the coda to a tragic production and performed by the tragic actors and chorus. Both these actors and the Aigisthos-figure on the *Chorēgoi* Vase (see fig. 4.2) are costumed in the grand style. The masks were life-like, the costumes rich and flowing. The effect was to reinforce the serious and elevated nature of the genre. In the satyr-drama, while the satyrs (see fig. 3.2) wore very little, a mask with an ugly satyric face and a pair of briefs with a small erection, the actors continued to wear the more serious costume of tragedy. Comedy was meant to depict the ridiculous

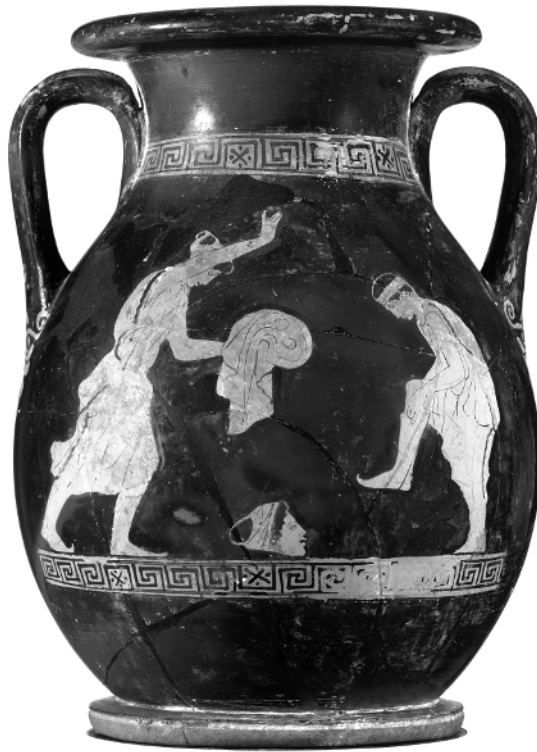


Figure 1.10 *Tragic performers dressing for their role as maenads, on a red-figure pelike, ca. 430. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Fund. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

(*geloion*), and to that end its actors wore grotesque masks, padded costumes, and a dangling *phallos* (see chapter 4).

Prizes were awarded for the first actor, first in tragedy and later in comedy. By the fourth century lead actors had become internationally known “stars,” and by the Dionysia of 340 lead actors would be shared by the tragic poets in order presumably to provide a level playing-field. In the fifth century actors would play for one poet only, and it has been suggested that the lead actor might play as many parts as possible in order to increase his visibility. This seems doubtful, as with a few exceptions roles belonged to the same actor throughout the play – the principal exception being *Oedipus at Kolonos*, where all three actors have to play Theseus in order for the drama to work with three actors. In *Libation-Bearers* the same actor plays Elektra, the Nurse, the effeminate Aigisthos, and Klytaimestra, showing that in 458 Aeschylus had an actor who excelled at female roles. Sometimes an actor will take on two significant roles in a play, as in *Trachinian Women*, where the lead actor will play first the weak Deianeira and then her brutal husband, Herakles, and in *Ajax* where the lead actor plays first Ajax and then his brother. In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* an actor’s roles



Figure 1.11 Costumed actor holding his mask. Apulian Gnathia fragment, attributed to the *Konnakis Painter*, ca. 350. © Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg. Photo: P. Neckermann.

between plays can be significant: the actor who plays Pylades, the mouthpiece of Apollo at *Libation-Bearers* 900–2, will play Apollo in the next drama, while the actor playing the masculine Klytaimestra will become Athene (“I am always for the male”).

Both tragedy and comedy could use other players, *kōpha prosōpa* (“silent faces”) in all sorts of supporting roles: guards, attendants, kitchen utensils (in *Wasps*), children. Sometimes the extra characters seem to speak, but it is more likely that their brief expressions were spoken by one of the three canonical actors, who after all were masked and would not be seen obviously talking – the barbarian god in *Birds*, the Persian envoy in *Acharnians*, the son of Admetos in *Alkestis*. In Aristophanes’ *Peace* a large statue of that goddess is hauled out from the *skēnē*-building. Comedy builds a nice bit of self-reference as Hermes undertakes to speak for the inanimate figure (657–63):

Trygaios: But tell me, my lady, why are you silent?

Hermes: She will not talk to the spectators, since she is very angry at them for what she has suffered.

Trygaios: Let her talk a little with you then.

Hermes: Tell me, my dear, what you have in mind for them. Go on, you who of all females hate shields the most. I'm listening. That's what you want? Okay.

The judgment scene of **Kratinos'** lost *Dionysalexandros* could require as many as five speaking characters (Dionysos-Alexandros, Hermes, and three goddesses), and if we suppose that each goddess spoke for herself, we would need three separate scenes, the third actor taking the role of each goddess in turn. But all other ancient allusions to the Judgment of Paris show the three goddesses together as a group. Clearly the easiest way to stage this scene is to have Hermes speak for each goddess in turn, although perhaps Aphrodite, the eventual victor, spoke to Dionysos-Alexandros in her own voice. There are also secondary choruses: of Athenians at the end of *Eumenides*, again twelve to match the twelve Furies; of huntsmen in *Hippolytos*, who have their own song at 61–71 and then sing with the regular chorus at 1102–50; of boys in Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and also in *Wasps*.

Accompanying the chorus was an *aulētēs*, often inaccurately described as a “flute-player,” since an *aulos* was a reed instrument, played by blowing into it, rather than across the mouthpiece. Visual representations show the *aulētēs* playing a double-reed instrument, with pipes of varying lengths. Rather than a flute, imagine a double oboe or double recorder, supported by a mouth- and cheek-piece and fastened by two straps around the head. The *aulētēs* wore splendid robes with elaborate decoration – witness the figure of Pronomos, who occupies the prime position on the Pronomos Vase (see fig. 3.1), more so than the poet himself who sits apart in a less prominent position, or the splendid striding figure on a red-figure *kratēr* in Sydney (fig. 1.12). The *aulētēs* would accompany the choral sections of tragedy, comedy, and satyr-drama and would provide the music for the dithyrambic choruses, as well as leading them into the performance space. At *Birds* 859–61 it appears that the *aulos*-player in that comedy was dressed as a bird, at least for the second half of the play:

You, stop playing. By Herakles, what is this? I have seen many strange things in my day, but I've never seen a crow wearing a mouthpiece.

The *aulos* possessed an ambiguous role in classical Athens. An *aulos*-player was a frequent presence in the parties and celebrations throughout the city. In one sense it was something to be officially disapproved of, since a popular myth told of Athene's rejection of the *aulos* because it disfigured her face as she blew into it. On the other hand a splendidly dressed *aulos*-player is portrayed on vases depicting performances of various kinds. Thus the *aulos* was the essential symbol of a formal performance in ancient Athens, and the splendid outfit might suggest that this disreputable character is on his best behavior when performing on a civic occasion. The modern equivalent of the *aulos* might be the guitar, the universal symbol of popular counter-culture, but also no stranger to a classical music concert.



Figure 1.12 Aulos-player, fragment of a red-figure skyphoid, attributed to the Palermo Painter, ca. 400. Reproduced courtesy of the Nicholson Museum, Sydney.

There are occasions where the spectators themselves become participants in the drama. This would not be at all unusual for comedy in view of its notoriously anti-illusionary approach. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* (274–6) Dionysos wonders where the “murderers and liars” are, whom Herakles said he would encounter in the underworld. We do not have the stage directions, but Xanthias must turn him to face the *theatron*:

Xanthias: Are you sure you don't see them?
 Dionysos: By Poseidon, yes I do, I see them now.

At the conclusion of the *agōn* in *Clouds* (1088–1104) the inferior argument wins his case by demonstrating that legal experts, tragic poets, and popular politicians are “assholes”:

Inferior Argument: Look at the spectators and see who are in the majority.
 Superior Argument: I'm looking.
 Inferior Argument: And what do you see?
 Superior Argument: By god, the assholes are everywhere.

There are places where the spectators are worked more largely into the drama. When Dikaiopolis pleads his case in *Acharnians* (496–556) he is doing far more than appeal to the hostile chorus, he becomes Aristophanes making a point to the larger *theatron*. In fact he begins by altering a line from Euripides to “do not be angry with me, men of the *theatron*.”

The spectators may also be brought into the drama in tragedy. In the opening scene of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, a priest appeals to Oedipus on behalf of his plague-struck people. These “children of Kadmos” are certainly the young suppliants who accompany the priest, but imagine that by the wave of the hand the Athenian spectators are brought into the drama. This could be breathtaking not just because the Athenians would be invited to become citizens of what was at the time an enemy city, but also because (if the play is correctly dated to the early 420s) Athenians were recovering from a plague of their own. At the end of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* a jury of twelve Athenians enters the *orchēstra* to decide the fate of Orestes. When the Furies abandon their anger and become Eumenides (“the kindly ones”), they are escorted to their new home beneath the Acropolis by the people of Athens. Could Aeschylus have resisted drawing the spectators into this installation? At the end of the National Theatre’s production of *Oresteia* in 1981, the audience was urged to “stand and be silent as the Kind Ones pass by.” Much of the dramatic impact of *Eumenides* lies in the resonance created as the action approached Athens of the dramatist’s own day.

Drama, Dionysos, and the *Polis*

One of the principal problems in the modern study of Greek drama is assessing the extent to which drama was a religious offering, an exploration of political identity, or an engaging piece of popular entertainment. It first should be noted that “religion” is not the best word to use when referring to the beliefs and worship of the ancient Greeks. To the modern ear the word suggests organized systems of formal rituals and creeds, a hierarchy of officials (“hierarchy” means literally “rule of the sacred”), or the sort of entry one checks off (or not) on a census form. In the ancient world the lines were not distinctly drawn between religion and philosophy or morality and ethics. Greeks worshipped their gods, not from any sense of personal guilt or fervent belief or in an attitude of humility, but because the gods of their myths represented forces beyond humanity in the universe, forces which had control over mortals, and which (it was felt) could be influenced by human worship and offerings. The principle of *dō ut dēs* (“I give so that you may give”) lay behind the offering of sacrifices to the gods. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* Agamemnon must give his daughter in sacrifice to Artemis so that he may get the winds that will take his army to Troy. This was a sacrifice accepted and the request answered, although with tragic results. We see the opposite at Sophokles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* 911–23, where Jokaste enters with offerings for Apollo, the god of light and knowledge who operates behind the action of the play, and asks for a happy outcome for Oedipus and for the people of Thebes. This will be a sacrifice not accepted and a prayer unanswered.

At Athens dramatic competitions were staged at the festivals of Dionysos, particularly at the Lenaia in late January and the City Dionysia in late March or early April. Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449a10) tells us that tragedy developed “from those who led the dithyramb,” and as we know from a couplet from Archilochos (700–650 BC; F 120 West),

for I know how to lead Lord Dionysos' dithyramb
when my wits are thunder-blasted with wine,

that the dithyramb had associations with Dionysos, it has become traditional to seek the origins of tragedy in the rituals of Dionysos. The introduction of satyr-drama was connected by certain ancient sources with a saying, “nothing to do with Dionysos,” and explained by some as an attempt to retain the presence of Dionysos within drama. Aristophanes himself at *Frogs* 366 claims comedy as part of “the ancestral rites of Dionysos.” We may be uncertain how far to trust Aristotle or other later sources, but the fact remains that in the fifth and fourth centuries drama at Athens *was* performed as part of the festivals of Dionysos and in the fourth century actors described themselves as “artists of Dionysos.” A number of questions suggest themselves at this point:

- What sort of god was Dionysos and why was he the patron of drama?
- Did the writers, performers, and audience see themselves as engaging in a religious occasion?
- Were the ancient dramas (especially tragedy) equivalent to the mediaeval mystery plays?
- Do formal religious rituals underlie Greek drama in any way?
- Were these festivals the excuse for a popular entertainment that was essentially “secular,” in the way Christmas (properly the birth of Christ) has become the season for pantomimes and big box-office movies?
- Is the association with Dionysos just a coincidence of geography?
- Does Greek drama in fact have “anything to do with Dionysos”?

One's first reaction on hearing the name Dionysos, or even more so with “Bacchos,” one of his titles, is to imagine a god of wine and unrestrained revelry. In Mozart's opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, Pedrillo and Osmin sing a boisterous drinking-song, “Vivat Bacchus! Bacchus lebe, der den Wein erfand!” (“Hail to Bacchos, long live Bacchos, Bacchos who discovered wine!”), which sums up well the prevalent modern conception of him. But Dionysos is far more than a god of wine and unrestrained celebration, he is an elemental force in human life. In *Bacchae* Teiresias considers him as the principle of the “wet,” as opposed to the “dry” of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, and he is very much a god of the liquid life force, not just the grape and wine, but of all plants (his titles include *dendritēs*, “of trees,” and *anthios* “of flowers”) and of the life force of animals. He is a god of growth and of the power of youth.

He is also a notoriously difficult deity to appreciate fully. His name has been found on the Linear B tablets ca. 1300 BC, and Homer knows of his encounter with Lykourgos (*Iliad* 6.130–40). But he was always an outsider in the world of the Olympians.

In the standard version of his birth (related in Euripides' *Bacchae*), he was the child of a divine father, Zeus, and a mortal princess, Semele of Thebes, and such an offspring of divine and human is usually a human hero, such as Perseus or Helen or Herakles. But Dionysos was "twice-born." Semele was consumed by the thunder-bolt of Zeus and the fetus, taken at six months from his mother's womb, was placed in the thigh of Zeus and born three months later – compare the birth of Athene (associated with wisdom) from the head of Zeus and the birth of Dionysos (a god of growth) from his genital region. Fathered by and born from Zeus, Dionysos thus becomes a god himself, but his myths tell a repeated story of the need for acceptance. His existence was hidden from Zeus' jealous wife, Hera, who would eventually drive the young god mad and send him on wanderings far beyond the Greek world. In *Bacchae* he returns to Greece from the East, followed by his Eastern devotees, to win his place as an Olympian deity and to introduce his rites to humanity.

Although a traditional Greek god with an impeccable pedigree, he is almost always seen as a foreigner from the East. His name "Dionysos" seems to combine the Greek "Dio-" (the root of Zeus) and "-nysos," which may relate to the eastern mountain Nysa, of which his followers sing at *Bacchae* 556. The *thyrsos* has been connected with the Hittite word *tuwarsa* ("vine") and his other name, Bacchos, with a Lydian name *bakivali*. There was thus something different about Dionysos, which made him partly "unGreek."

He is often set against Apollo, most notably by Nietzsche in his antithesis of the Apollonian (order, structure, light, intellect) and the Dionysian (chaos, darkness, emotion), and is associated with disguise and transformation. Here is the god who breaks down boundaries (youth/age, male/female, human/animal, emotion/intellect), who confounds the norms, who in *Bacchae* drives women from the city to the mountain and brings his own wildness into the heart of the city. His associations are with the animal – the possessed Pentheus in *Bacchae* sees Dionysos as a bull and he is frequently shown on art with the panther or leopard. Those who encounter and resist Dionysos can find themselves transformed into animal guise. His followers are the maenads ("the mad women"), who dress in fawn-skins and carry the *thyrsos* (a branch tipped with ivy), and the male satyrs, half-human and half-animal, creatures that are both more and less than human. In their wilder celebrations the worshippers of Dionysos ran berserk on the mountainside (*oreibasia*), filled with wine and the intoxication of the group experience, catching and rending their prey (*sparagmos*) and eating the raw flesh (*ōmophagia*). In *Bacchae* the messenger describes the women on the mountain, in harmony with and in control of nature. They nurse the young of wild animals, and with their *thyrsoi* produce milk and honey from the earth.

The myths about Dionysos reveal an interesting tension. Some show his power and devastating treatment of those who reject his worship. Pentheus at Thebes is the best-known example (Euripides' *Bacchae*), while Aeschylus wrote a tetralogy about Lykourgos of Thrace, who also opposed Dionysos and was destroyed. The daughters of Minyas in Orchomenos and of Proteus in Argos refused to accept the rites of Dionysos and were punished with madness, made to kill their own children, and transformed into animals. The *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos* tells how pirates attempted to kidnap the god, thinking him a prince worthy of ransom, and how the god caused

vines to cover the ship and turned the sailors into dolphins. In one story the vine (*ampelos*) gets its name from Ampelos, a beautiful youth and beloved of the god, who died accidentally at Dionysos' hands, and from the god's tears falling on the boy's body grew the first vines and grapes. His followers were the maenads, the "mad women," and his cult the antithesis to the organized city and the rational order of the mind, two of the stereotypes that we associate with the ancient Greeks. Perhaps that is why he was an outsider to the usual Greek way of looking at the world; he represented emotion and instinct as against intellect and ordered behavior.

But for all these tales of destruction, Dionysos promises blessings to his followers: not just wine – Dionysos is far more than "jolly Bacchos" – but release from toil and the structures of daily routine, from the miseries of age and responsibility. The chorus in *Bacchae* sings (417–23):

This god, the son of Zeus, rejoices in festivities, and is friends with Peace, the goddess that bestows wealth and raises boys to men. To rich and poor alike he has given an equal share of the delight from wine that banishes pain.

He is associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and as the messenger in *Bacchae* puts it, "without wine there is no Love nor anything pleasant for men" (773–4). His myths may involve the death of his victims, but he did bring his mother Semele back from the dead and install her as a goddess among the Olympians. Hermes may cross the boundary between life and death, when he escorts the dead to the underworld, but only Dionysos can dissolve that boundary.

An alternative version of the birth of Dionysos makes him "twice-born" in quite a different sense. Born of Zeus and Persephone (queen of the Underworld), he was to be the god to succeed Zeus and unite the upper celestial world of light and life with the lower world of death and darkness. Zeus' ever-jealous wife, Hera, incited the Titans to tear Dionysos to pieces and devour his flesh. Athene saved the heart and gave it to Zeus, who swallowed it, thereby taking the essence of Dionysos into himself. He subsequently made Semele pregnant with Dionysos and the story of his birth continued as we know it. The Titans were destroyed by the fire-bolts of Zeus, and from their ashes came the race of human beings, possessing both the rebellious spirit of the Titans and the godhood of Dionysos. This was the Dionysos of the Orphics, a cult like that of the Mother and Daughter at Eleusis, that promised its followers "salvation" in the next world, through initiation in this world as well as a moral life. The chorus of initiates in *Frogs* may well be devotees of this cult of Dionysos. He is often seen as the Greek equivalent of the youthful consort of the Eastern Mother-Goddess (Adonis or Tammuz), whose death and rebirth both explains and enables the yearly cycle of agricultural fertility.

In his wild rituals worshippers would lose their own identity, become possessed by the deity they worshipped, and thus achieve a sort of group communion with one another. But here lies the dangerous side of Dionysos, for he is essentially hostile to the concept of the individual and conducive of the collective. Although for early Christians Dionysos was a dangerous pagan god, the parallels between his mythology and the experience of the early church are striking. Both Dionysos and Christ were

born of the Sky-Father god and a human woman; each experienced a marvelous birth; each died and returned to life; through the eating of flesh and drinking of wine, the followers of each become *entheos* (“god within”) and achieve a “communion” with each other; and the devotees of each are promised happiness in the next life, through initiation and by behaving in an ethically proper fashion in this life. Scenes from the myths of Dionysos appear on Christian sarcophagi, and in the Byzantine period an anonymous writer created a *Christus Patiens* (“The Suffering Christ”), by using extensive material from *Bacchae*, to the extent that we can restore part of the missing scene at the end of *Bacchae* from the *Christus Patiens*. Not without cause has Christ been spoken of as “Dionysus’ successor.”

So this was the god who is depicted in art as presiding over the dramatic festival. But the questions posed above remain. Put generally, was the experience in the theater perceived by the performers and spectators as a “religious” experience? When the actors called themselves “artists of Dionysos,” did they see themselves as conscious devotees like the maenads and the satyrs? In the front row of the stone theater at Athens are seats inscribed “of the priest of.” Thus the priest of Dionysos had a front-row seat in the center of the *theatron* (see fig. 1.9) – at *Frogs* 297 the frightened character of Dionysos exclaims, “protect me, my priest, so I can have drink with you afterwards.” The dramatic productions at the Lenaia festival fell into the jurisdiction of the archon *basileus*, who supervised the religious life of the state. When the chorus at *Frogs* 686 describes itself as a “holy band,” it is speaking in more than its dramatic character as *mystai* (initiates), it is placing itself in the context of the religious occasion. The theater was situated above the sacred precinct of Dionysos, and his temple stood closely beside and behind the *skēnē*, in full view of the spectators in the *theatron*.

But few of the plots of tragedy have much to do with Dionysos. We have Euripides’ *Bacchae* and know of other plays with this title, and Aeschylus’ *Lykourgeia* will have dramatized Dionysos’ encounter with Lykourgos in Thrace. But Dionysos seems to appear more often in comedy and satyr-drama than in tragedy, and while gods do appear on stage in Greek drama, the principal interest of the dramatists, especially Sophokles and Euripides, is with its human heroes, their sufferings and their place in the universe. Greek tragedy, indeed much of Greek myth, does not deal first and foremost with gods. Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* (458 BC) and the Prometheus-plays attributed to Aeschylus are unusual in that gods dominate the action rather than humans. Taplin (1978: 162) declared decisively: “there is nothing intrinsically Dionysiac about Greek tragedy.” In his view tragedy had passed from whatever initial connection it may have had with the god and his cult to a “political” (in the sense “of the *polis*”) experience. People went to the theater as a communal activity and for an aesthetic entertainment, that in the case of tragedy raised “serious” (*spoudaios*) issues, but there was no longer any sense of the “religious” or the cultic about the event.

Critics were quick to respond, to insist upon an intrinsic connection between tragedy and the god. For Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988) Dionysos was the god who crosses the boundaries and confuses reality and illusion, who in his collective makes us lose our self-consciousness and identity of self. Tragedy is appropriately Dionysiac when we suspend our disbelief in watching the drama and enter a world of fiction and *mimēsis* (representation), a world presided over by the mask behind

which individual identity is hidden. Goldhill (1987) saw the essence of tragedy as political, as part of a civic discourse in the fifth century, where one's assumptions and ideas are challenged. What better patron, he argues, than the god of subversion himself? Seaford (1994), on the other hand, regarded Dionysos as essentially a democratic god, one who removes the barriers between city and country, between rich and poor, privileged and the ordinary citizens. In the collective of Dionysos, "all shall equal be." Many of the stories of tragedy depend on an opposition between the claims of the *oikos* ("house") and the claims of the *polis* ("city"). Great individuals may suffer or die (Oedipus or Pentheus) but the larger collective lives on, and in the case of Thebes in *Bacchae*, will be "saved" by Dionysos. Both tragedy and Dionysos are symbols or products of the Athenian democracy, and hence the performance of drama at the festival of this "democratic" deity.

On the other hand, we must reiterate that the plays as we have them have little to do with Dionysos. Scullion (2002) estimates that only about 4 percent of the plays we know about were concerned with Dionysos. He is not the god most often mentioned in the plays – that honor belongs to Zeus. Dionysos is at times invoked by the chorus in their songs, but so too are other gods. The evidence for dramatic production in other cities shows that drama was not exclusively performed under the patronage of Dionysos. The plays were part of the cult of Dionysos at Athens, but is the connection an intrinsic one? Masks are not unique to his cult – we know that heads of Dionysos were carried on a pole at the Lenaia, but there is no hint that these were meant to be worn. When the satyrs in Aeschylus' *Spectators* encounter life-like masks of themselves, they intend to hang them in the temple, not wear them. Tragedy may be "goat-song," but the goat is not in itself a Dionysiac creature. Goats were sacrificed to Apollo, the Muses, Pan, and Artemis. If we did not know that Greek drama (in particular, tragedy) was performed at the festivals of Dionysos, would we have been able to deduce that from the texts of the plays themselves? If the answer seems to be no, then perhaps we are forcing drama into a Dionysiac box.

Greek drama, especially Greek tragedy, is eminently emotional and entertaining. In a world of small cinemas and contained theaters, we cannot realize what the experience of the ancient outdoor civic theater was like. Aristotle states that the "end" of tragedy is to elicit pity and fear and to achieve a *katharsis* of these emotions, and an audience of several thousand people must have responded to a particularly effective drama (be it tragedy or comedy) with a collective and emotional response. But was that response one that they would have associated with Dionysos? One of the results of the worship of Dionysos was the achieving of ecstasy (in Greek, *ekstasis* or "standing out"), and some might assume that the aesthetic experience of attending the theater, suspending disbelief, and becoming involved in the sufferings of another was in some sense an *ekstasis*. But how different was this from listening to the epics about Odysseus and Achilles, which are certainly not Dionysiac?

The festival of Dionysos was the formal setting for drama, but is it a case of cause and effect? Scullion (2002) suggests that the theater was located near the temple of Dionysos by the accident of geography, that the natural place to locate a *theatron* was on the south-east slope of the Acropolis, in the area traditionally associated with the cult of Dionysos at Athens, and that this is all the connection there is. Perhaps when

the dramatic festivals were established or reformed ca. 500, or after the Persians had invaded and destroyed the city in 480, officials wanted to develop the part of the city on the other side from the *agora*. In the 440s Perikles had an *ōdeion* erected beside the theater, in fact intruding into it. Spectators entered the theater along the Street of the Tripods, the monuments erected by victorious dramatic *chorēgoi*. By this point that area is now a theater district, and we may want to stress that association rather than the presence of the temple of Dionysos. By the late fifth century, 100 years or so into the history of tragedy, perhaps one went to the theater to be entertained, to be part of the group experience, but not one that had much of the formally religious about it.

On the other side of the debate, we know that the Athenians had their own myth about Dionysos' arrival in their city, which was used to explain the dramatic choral performances in honor of the god. Like the others previously discussed, it involved an initial rejection of the god. But unlike the others, the punishment Dionysos inflicts on the city does not involve the removal of the womenfolk or the destruction of the ruling family; rather all the men in the city are afflicted by a disease of the genitals, collectively sharing in the suffering and humiliation that their rejection of the god has wrought. Seeking a cure, an oracle advises them to receive the god in every honorific way possible. On this advice they fashion *phalloi* and process the god into the heart of the city where he is fêted with sacrifice, song and dance. According to some, this reception ceremony for Dionysos and the earlier forms of song and dance associated with it are the forerunners of the entertainments performed during the City Dionysia. Thus, insofar as the yearly City Dionysia rehearsed the acceptance and establishment of Dionysos' cult at Athens, it was a commemorative, religious, and ritual celebration.

Greek drama was not a re-presentation or re-enactment of ritual in the strict sense of that term. The Cambridge anthropologists explained myth as developing out of ritual. We worship a certain way, do and say things in a certain ordered and repeated pattern, often for reasons unknown, and myths were invented to explain the details of that ritual. Beneath the form of a Greek tragedy Murray (1912) detected a supposed pattern of ritual of the "spirit of the year," a cycle of death and re-birth, where the death is a sacrificial death of the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat for whom "it is expedient that one man should die for the people." Characters such as Oedipus (*Oedipus at Kolonos*), Pentheus (*Bacchae*), Eteokles (*Seven*), do die at the end of their dramas, but that does not make them into the scapegoat of Greek society. In fact no play that we possess fits this theoretical model at all well. By its very nature ritual is performed in the same way again and again. What matters for tragedy in particular is the variation of the pattern, not the pattern itself. For comedy, Cornford (1934) replaced death in tragedy with a sacred fertility marriage, but although some comedies end with the marriage of the hero with a divine or quasi-divine being (Trygaios with Harvest-time in *Peace* and Peisetairos with Princess in *Birds*), that does not turn Aristophanes' extraordinarily witty and sophisticated political comedies into a fertility union.

Drama may certainly employ ritual, however, and recent criticism has concentrated on how various rituals, familiar to and taken for granted by the audience, impinge upon the drama and contribute to our understanding of them. Supplication, for example, or swearing an oath involved a formal process in Greek culture, and plays like Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and *Medea* exploit the spectators' familiarity with

these actions. Sophokles' *Ajax* turns on the themes of proper sacrifice and due burial. Plays often end with the establishment of a cult or ritual, such as the worship of Artemis near Athens (*Iphigeneia among the Taurians*) or the honors paid to the dead Hippolytos, and on a grander scale the worship of Dionysos himself (*Bacchae*), or that the Furies will be established beneath the Acropolis as Eumenides ("kind ones"). The dramatic impact gains when the modern reader comes to understand what the ancient spectator knew as part of his cultural heritage. For example, the choral ode at *Hippolytos* 1104–50 is unusual in that the principal chorus of serving-women sings with the subsidiary chorus of young huntsmen, first alternately and then perhaps together in the last *strophē*. This is a play very much about love and the relations between male and female, and this song may well relate to the ritual wedding-songs by men and women, ironic in that Hippolytos wants no part in Love, even more so in that Hippolytos will be posthumously honored by brides on their wedding eve. Antigone sees her fate of being walled up in a tomb as a marriage to Death, and her song with the chorus at 801–82 is full of the language and symbolism of marriage. In fact the fate of women in tragedy is frequently presented in terms of a marriage to death. Seaford (1987) has seen in the fate of Pentheus in *Bacchae*, who will find not new life and "salvation," but death, an inversion of the initiation-ritual of the devotee of Dionysos. Thus while Greek drama is not the playing out of the same basic ritual in different circumstances, the dramatists can exploit familiar rituals for effect. In *Wasps* we have the comic spectacle of the generations reversed, the conservative son trying to control and educate his willful father. Here the details of the Athenian rite of passage, the *ephēbeia*, would have illuminated the humor of that play. In passing, one should note that a sacrifice is never performed on stage. Aristophanes makes good comedy out of preparing and then delaying the ritual sacrifice in both *Peace* and *Birds*, with the exasperated hero doing the job off stage.

Dionysos himself is a character in Greek drama, but as we have pointed out above, not all that common in tragedy. Perhaps there were not all that many myths about Dionysos that could become good drama. Early Greek myth was an incredibly fertile source of stories about all sorts of heroes. Homer had made the Greek war against Troy part of the common heritage of Greece; other song cycles had related the troubles at Thebes, the early history of Athens, and the boar-hunt at Kalydon. A good dramatist and an eager audience will have expected tragedy to do more than relate the adventures of Dionysos, which could have had a monotonous pattern: the advent of the god, rejection by others, and the god's eventual triumph and reception. Of the thirty genuine tragedies that we possess from the fifth century, only one (Euripides' *Bacchae*) has anything to do with Dionysos. Two lost presentations by Aeschylus did dramatize two separate incidents in Dionysos' career (a possible trilogy set at Thebes and the *Lykourgeia*), but we do not have any hints of a dramatic treatment of the story of the daughters of Minyas or the death of Ikarios, both of whom encountered Dionysos with appropriately tragic results.

Dionysos is more at home in satyr-drama and in comedy. The satyrs are his followers, and in the first and last lines of Euripides' *Cyclops* they invoke Dionysos under his title *Bromios* ("the roaring one"). He was a character in Aeschylus' *Spectators*, berating his satyrs for abandoning his service for the life of an athlete (F 78a):

no-one, young or old, can resist the appeal of my dances in double rows,
but you lot want to be an Isthmian athlete, and crowned with boughs of pine
you pay no honour to the ivy.

He must have been a character in Sophokles' *Young Dionysos*, where the discovery of wine was dramatized, and in Achaïos' *Hephaistos* he facilitated the return of Hephaistos to Olympos. Again the sensual delights of Dionysos are presented to Hephaistos (F 17):

Dionysos: First we will delight you with dinner – and here it is!
Hephaistos: And then how will you bewitch me?
Dionysos: I shall anoint your entire body with fair-smelling perfume.
Hephaistos: Won't you first give me water to wash my hands?
Dionysos: Oh yes, as the table is being removed.

But it is in comedy that Dionysos appears most often, and he does so, in Sommerstein's apt phrase, in the role of "Dionysos as anti-hero." Comedy felt free to make fun of its gods, even (especially) the deity for whom it was being produced. Comedians would put Dionysos in the most unlikely situation possible and then watch the fun emerge as this essentially unheroic and pleasure-loving god tried to react to his situation. Two slaves at *Frogs* 740 describe Dionysos well:

Slave: Your master is a very noble fellow.
Xanthias: Of course he is – all he knows is drinking and fucking.

This last carries in the Greek a neat aural ring of *pinein* and *binein*. In Kratinos' mythical burlesque, *Dionysalexandros* (437?), Dionysos fills in for Alexandros (Paris) to judge the famous beauty-contest of the goddesses. It is he that wins Helen and a thousand ships of very angry Greeks. At the end of the comedy the real Alexandros keeps Helen and hands Dionysos over to the mercies of the Greeks. In Aristophanes' *Babylonians* (426), Dionysos arrives in Athens with his Eastern followers and encounters for the first time a demagogue, who extorts money from him and threatens legal action. In Eupolis' *Officers* (415?), Dionysos joins the Athenian navy and is taught the arts of war by the admiral Phormion. The fragments show us the effete and ineffectual Dionysos trying to adapt to the rigors of army life. In *Frogs* (405) he disguises himself as Herakles for his descent to the underworld to bring back Euripides.

Disguise and confusion of identity seem to be very much part of the dramatic *persona* of Dionysos. One of the boundaries that he dissolves is that of gender. In Aeschylus' *Edonians* Lykourgos is puzzled by this figure which appears to be both male and female. In *Bacchae* Pentheus is both confused and attracted by the delicate hair and smooth white skin of the "priest," who is Dionysos in disguise. In Eupolis' *Officers* someone mistakes Dionysos for a "she" and threatens to sell "her" as soon as possible. In Kratinos' *Dionysalexandros* he appears as Paris, either in the guise of a Trojan prince or more likely as a country shepherd, and we are told that the chorus of satyrs laugh and jeer at him. In *Frogs* (38–47) Herakles breaks out laughing at the sight of Dionysos in his usual saffron robe, covered by a lion-skin, wearing soft boots and carrying a

club. Later in the comedy (298–300) his slave calls him first “Herakles” – “don’t call me that or use that name” – and then “Dionysos” – “that’s even worse.” Dressing Dionysos in disguise and then penetrating that disguise was part of his role in drama.

Drama then does have a religious dimension. Plays were produced as part of the festivals in honor of Dionysos, when the normal life of the city stopped and the atmosphere of carnival took over. Centuries later, Plutarch records an anecdote about Sokrates’ reply to a question about whether he was worried about comedy’s unfair caricature of him (*On the Education of Children* 10c–d):

When Aristophanes produced his *Clouds* and piled abuse of every kind on him, one of those present said, “Aren’t you angry, Sokrates, for making fun of you in that way?” “Hardly,” replied Sokrates, “for in the theater I am made fun of as if I were at a great party.”

Lucian (*Fisherman* 14) has Philosophy demonstrate to her devotees that she at least can take a joke:

You got hot and bothered because someone was being rude to you? And yet you know that although Comedy treats me badly at the Dionysia, I still consider her a close friend. I’ve never taken her to court or even had a word of private complaint to her. I just let her make her usual jokes that belong to the festival. For I know that no harm can come from a joke.

At various places in the plays the gods and rituals of fifth-century Athens can be seen behind and beneath the texts, and one of the great issues of tragedy is the relationship between humans and gods. But Greek drama, like Greek myth in general, is more about human men and women. Gods do appear on stage, do intervene and influence the action, interact (often violently) with the human characters, but what interests the playwrights (particularly Euripides) is human behavior and human reaction. What do humans believe and expect from their gods? How do these gods live up to human expectations? Does a divine force or entity really behave in the very anthropomorphic manner that traditional myth (especially Homer) depicts them? Gods are immortal, gods have power, gods exist and are responsible in some way for the ways of the world. Greek tragedy sets out before its spectators instances of this interaction, not with the purpose of providing comforting answers, but of raising uncomfortable questions. Perhaps, after all, a festival honoring an ambiguous and discomfiting deity was not a bad place to attempt to explore the meaning of life, and more specifically, to assess how one might live a good or even the best life.

Drama and the polis

In most Greek cities citizens would readily accept that participation in their city’s religious festivals was an essential part of their civic duty. At the City Dionysia all legal and administrative business in the city ceased, at least for the opening day’s activities, to permit all citizens to attend the celebration. Later we have evidence

indicating that even prisoners were given something like our modern “day-pass” so that they too could join in the festivities. By the fourth century the Theoric Fund had been established to pay the cost of attendance for those who could not afford the expense. Clearly it was deemed of great importance that all citizens be released from competing commitments in order to venerate the god. Since all religious festivals were to some degree directed toward the protection and prosperity of their participants, they all might be said to serve political ends in the broadest sense of that term, especially when those festivals were community-wide. Thus the two Dionysiac festivals at Athens at which drama was produced can be said to serve both religious and political purposes. But much recent scholarship assumes an intensely close relationship between drama and the Athenian *polis*, especially the democratic *polis*.

This inevitably raises the question of drama’s relationship to *ta politika* (“the affairs of the *polis*”): its laws, its political identity and ideology. Was drama “political,” that is, “about the *polis*”? Did it contribute to the creation of an Athenian identity, or help to define what it meant to be an Athenian *politēs* (“citizen”)? Was drama a form of mass education, a vehicle for the instruction of the citizens in matters of “good” and “bad” citizenship? Or was it a vehicle for the airing of concerns that could not be given expression in other public forums? The answers to these questions are not mutually exclusive, for drama can speak to its spectators on several levels simultaneously. But to address the issues raised by these questions we need to view the institutionalization of drama from two perspectives, the context of its performance and the content of the plays, for each may be politicized in different ways.

Whether the dramatic competitions at the City Dionysia were established by Peisistratos in the 530s or in the aftermath of the Kleisthenic reforms ca. 501, we can say that they came into being through the sanction of Athens’ political leadership. The establishment of a new festival could have served to increase the ruler’s popularity among the citizen population, making it a good political move of benefit to all. The very name of festival was also strongly political. Whether the Dionysia was referred to as the “Great” or the “City,” such a name speaks not only of the grandeur of the event but also of the grandeur of the *polis* capable of sponsoring it.

The City Dionysia’s “political” connections are further seen in the nature of the figure who would govern its annual production. The competitions were not supervised by the archon *basileus*, the man traditionally in charge of the religious celebrations in the city, but rather by the archon *eponymous*. This was the magistrate after whom the year was named (“in the archonship of . . .”) and was selected from among eligible Athenian citizens of the upper property classes, who traditionally had charge of civic affairs. That the administration of the City Dionysia should have been granted to the chief civic magistrate clearly locates the festival in a political context.

It may also seem that the timing of the festival was set with the interests of the *polis* in view. By late March the sea lanes had once again opened for the sailing season, permitting the tyrant as well as other prosperous Athenian families to play host to many visiting dignitaries and aristocratic friends from overseas, showcasing their city, promoting its cultural advances and advantages, and perhaps using the occasion to establish potentially lucrative trading connections and alliances for themselves and the city.

Unfortunately we are poorly informed about the way the festival was conducted from the time of its inauguration until the mid fifth century. However, we do know that towards the end of the sixth century, the City Dionysia was re-organized so that the tragic playwrights were now required to produce three tragedies *and* a satyr-drama, apparently (according to one source) because by that time the dramas produced at the festival had “nothing to do with Dionysos.” Thus if the god were not being properly honored at his own festival, this might have serious negative repercussions for the well-being of the *polis*. The Athenians may have felt themselves particularly vulnerable at this time in their history when the city had just recently overthrown the tyranny and taken its first tentative steps along the road to a democratic government. At the same time, the introduction of a new dramatic genre to the City Dionysia, one that self-consciously made fun out of the traditional heroic values and stories just as Athens was permitting more of its citizen-male populace to participate actively in its political institutions, suggests that the festival’s re-organization was also undertaken to reflect the new political freedoms enjoyed by the *polis*. So the Dionysia both protects and celebrates the city through its control of the medium of drama.

More clearly reflective of “political things” are the organization of the festival and the events which took place in the opening days of the competition. First of all, the funding of the festival’s choral performances and feasts, which had formerly been in the hands of the city’s wealthiest citizen(s), was partially taken over by the city treasury, which assumed the expenses for the sacrifices on the 8th and 9th of Elaphebolion. The archon then appointed a *chorēgos*, a prosperous citizen responsible for the expenses involved in bringing the playwright’s dramas to public performance, to each playwright to whom he had “granted a chorus.” This change converted a previous act of magnanimous personal generosity into an expenditure considered to be an integral part of his duty to the *polis*, as important as funding the construction of a warship or providing for the provisioning of its crew for one year, and equally, if not more, costly. If his playwright won the competition, the city permitted the *chorēgos* to erect a monument to his victory, usually along the road leading into the theater. The city was thus creating a secondary competition amongst its wealthiest citizens in a contest for public honor and recognition. But whether this man funded the winning playwright or not, if he was (or had aspirations to become) a political leader, his expenditures on the dramatic competitions could be cited with pride as proof of his commitment to the *polis* and of his standing as a good citizen. This is certainly the case with the speakers of Antiphon I.β (410s) and Lysias 21 (390s).

One such position of leadership was that of general (*stratēgos*), which in the 480s became an elective office and replaced that of the archons in political power and prestige. Athens elected ten such figures annually from a list of such eligible citizens. Plutarch (*Kimōn* 8.7–9) records that in the year 468, when these generals entered the theater to pour the ritual libations that opened the competition, it was decided that they should remain in the theater to serve as judges for that year’s dramatic contests. Normally the judges were selected by lottery, again from a group of eligible citizens, one from each of the ten tribes into which Kleisthenes had divided the people of Attica at the time of his reforms. The generals too were elected according to the same distribution, usually one from each tribe, so this last-minute change in the usual

procedures would not adversely affect the equality of representation among the tribal groups.

This account belongs to the late first century AD and may seem to some a romantic fiction, but if true, it is very suggestive of the way in which this first day of the festival was being politicized. Plutarch notes that because that year's competitors had generated an especially high level of rivalry "among the spectators" (it was Sophokles' first appearance at the Dionysia), the archon determined to make the outcome even more significant by having men of such dignity determine the results. This same passage is our source for the information that the generals regularly poured the opening libations. But why should Athens' foremost military leaders be deemed the appropriate figures to open a dramatic competition by regularly performing this service? The answer would seem to rest in the understanding shared by the Athenians of the relationship between contests of words and contests of war. The generals exemplified (in theory, if not always in practice) the ideal citizen male, a man gifted in the arts of deliberation and excelling in the arts of war, a ready defender of the city in word and action. Having the generals offer the libation to Dionysos Eleuthereus ("freer") carried two messages simultaneously. For the citizens, it reminded them of their present freedoms as well as their obligations to the *polis* as citizens to rise to its defense. It also demonstrated to visitors that Athenians lived in a *polis* that valued its freedoms, one which had sacrificed much to win freedom for others, and one still ready and able to defend itself and others against any who would impose their rule upon it.

Three other notable events were included in the opening ceremonies at various points in the fifth century. First, the levies (*phoros*) that Athens had collected for the support of the Delian League (later the Athenian "Empire") were paraded into the theater, talent by talent. This overt display of the annual *phoros* would remind citizen and visitor alike of Athens' military prowess and its glory as the *polis* most responsible for the defeat of the Persian invasion. This was both a point of pride for the city and justification for its leadership of the Delian League. Following this public display of Athenian glory was the announcement of the names and the special honors granted to citizens and to foreign friends of the city, who had provided exemplary service to the Athenian *polis* over the past year. This is first attested for the year 410/9. Then came the parading of the city's war orphans in full military panoply provided by the city, young men whose fathers had died while on military service, who had been raised to maturity from the public purse. These war orphans conveyed a strong political message to the spectator: Athens is a *polis* of military might, a people who value service to the city and who are prepared to raise up the next generation of warriors who will, in their turn, fight to protect it. Taken in conjunction with the use of the ten generals to pour the ritual libations, these preliminary displays of wealth, exemplary service, and military prowess would have served to remind all present that Athens, like her festival, was "Great."

Thus much of what transpired at the preliminary ceremonies at the City Dionysia was designed to display the best of the city to the city and its guests. The *polis* made use of this festival to represent itself in a particular way, as a *polis* with a glorious past and a present equally worthy of renown. So a festival which, according to some, seems to have been instituted partly to celebrate the "freeing" of Eleutherai from Boiotia

was first reinterpreted and restructured as a celebration of Athens' own freedom from tyranny. By the time we get a reasonably clear view of the festival's full organization in the second half of the fifth century, the freedom now celebrated has become international in scope, for the Athenian *polis* styled itself as the liberator of Greece from foreign oppression. Seen from this viewpoint, the context of drama at the City Dionysia has become highly politicized.

To this point our attention has been focused on City Dionysia, primarily because it was the first and most important dramatic competition established by the Athenian *polis*. A second reason for this focus is quite simply the comparative lack of evidence for the companion dramatic festival, the Lenaia. The festival itself is one of great antiquity, organized under the administration of the archon *basileus*, the traditional religious magistrate. But it would seem that its activities were not politicized to the same degree as the Great Dionysia until the 440s when it became a recognized competitive venue, first for comedies and then for tragedies.

It is quite possible that the presentation of humorous and insulting impromptu skits had long been a part of this festival. Being able to laugh at oneself and at others with others is a liberating and unifying experience. During this period of "sacred time," when social niceties could be laid aside and the traditional deference for one's social superiors ignored, tensions among and between the city's residents could be alleviated through their airing in ritualized and controllable ways. Thus an event at which the city's residents were permitted to let off steam in the form of insults actually worked to ensure the relative stability of the city. This returns us to the idea that community-wide religious festivals contribute to the preservation and prosperity of the *polis*, first by venerating a god who might otherwise withdraw his benefits from the community, and second by bringing the community together in a "sacred time" during which they can re-affirm their collective identity, even if, as at the Lenaia, this meant laughing at themselves. However, it was only when the city granted the Lenaia the status of a competition, awarded prizes and kept a record of the yearly winners that we can speak of its relationship to the politics of the Athenian *polis* in the same way as we have done for the Dionysia.

Partly because it fell within the winter months, the Lenaia remained a festival that fewer outsiders attended. Things said and done at this contest were apparently only for the eyes and ears of residents of the town of Athens. It differed markedly from the City Dionysia in that metics (resident aliens with limited rights and obligations in the city) were allowed to participate both as choral performers and as *chorēgoi*. Granting this right seems to have satisfied three needs of importance to the *polis*. First, by including this marginalized group as active participants in a city-wide celebration of Dionysos, the city gave appropriate honor to the god of communal celebration. Second, it gave a potentially troublesome group of outsiders within the city a sense of belonging denied them in other areas and so reduced the threat that dissatisfaction among them might cause to the city's stability. Aristophanes with magnanimity (and some condescension) pronounces (*Acharnians* 504–8):

The contest is that at the Lenaia, and foreigners are not yet here. The tribute is not coming in, nor allies from the cities. We are here by ourselves, clean-hulled (so to speak), for I consider the metics to be the bran of our population.

Third, it served to reinforce the Athenians' view of themselves as an open and inclusive society. So while the Lenaia had already served some important needs of the *polis* before becoming a competitive venue, after the contests for comedy had been granted civic recognition, it became possible for some metics to aspire to win a share in the renown for service to the *polis* that was formerly available only to full citizens. In this context, the Lenaia too was politicized.

In terms of the differences in the context of dramatic productions between these two festivals, we may make the following observations. Both venues were used by the city of Athens as a *polis* to promote Athenian identity, political unity, and shared ideals about citizenship. However, the City Dionysia, by the mid fifth century, if not sooner, was used to showcase Athens' superiority as a *polis* to all, as a center for the arts, as a military might, and as a beneficent world leader. The Lenaia, by contrast, was more inward-focused, more concerned with maintaining the unity and stability of the *polis*, which was then showcased to the world at the City Dionysia.

Drama's political content

Scholars generally agree on the political nature of the City Dionysia's opening day ceremonies. What remains to consider is the degree to which the content of the plays performed at this festival was politicized. The evidence can be assessed along two somewhat different lines: the degree to which tragedy and comedy engage with current political issues, and the degree to which the dramas intentionally reflect the socio-political institutions of the *polis*.

For Old Comedy there can be little argument that its content is both topical and political. Not restricted to known myths, story-lines and characters, comic drama was free to present a humorous look at issues of current interest to the *polis* as well as to shape its characters around well- and lesser-known persons in the Athenian political arena, if it wished to do so. Many did so choose, especially in the latter part of the fifth century. In the extant plays of Aristophanes we encounter the names of politicians, philosophers, businessmen, and other poets. Some are applauded for their contribution to the *polis*, but most become the butt of jokes aimed at various aspects of their personal and public lives and especially at their policies. Kleon, the demagogue, who succeeded Perikles in the leadership of the Athenians, is a favorite target of Aristophanes. But he is in good company with other famous names such as Perikles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sokrates. At the heart of much of this ridicule is a perceived failure on the part of the named figure to serve the *polis*, to behave like a good citizen. For instance, a politician named Kleonymos is called a coward for allegedly throwing his shield away in battle, and thus as one who has failed in his duty to defend the city. Euripides and Sokrates are presented as men who encourage the undermining of civic values, and thus as failing in their obligation to the city to set good examples for the youths or to be good teachers. In the 420s the strongest critique is reserved for Kleon whose activities as the "leader of the people" are reinterpreted as vulgar and self-serving. He exploits the jury system to indict his political opponents, using jury-pay to keep the jurors "in his back pocket" (*Wasps*); he is a corrupt overseer of the Athenian civic household, bent on personal gain at the people's expense (*Knights*).

When Kleon died in 422/1, others popular leaders like Hyperbolos and Kleophon become the targets of Aristophanes' humor. But there would also seem to be a strong critique of the current state of the city's institutions, policies and citizenry, of the injustices that the system permits and that the people tolerate or even bring upon themselves.

The topicality of tragedy is far less easy to determine, although some tragic dramas have been viewed as more transparently topical, or as containing sections that make topical allusions, despite the fact that the dramas are ostensibly set in the distant past. In the early days of the fifth century, it was even acceptable to make recent history the subject of tragedy, as in Aeschylus' *Persians* (472), which describes the victory in 480 of Athens and her allies over the Persians from the Persian perspective. We also hear, however, that when Phrynichos (career: 510–470) decided to stage an historical tragedy entitled *The Capture of Miletos* (493 or 492), based on the fall of Miletos to the Persians in 494, he was assessed a heavy fine and this subject forbidden to be dramatized again. Apparently, the *polis* did not appreciate being reminded of its recent failure to aid the Milesians in their time of need.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BC) provides one of the most frequently used examples of a drama which makes allusions to the city's current events, especially in the concluding play of the trilogy, *Eumenides*, while its actions and characters remain located in the mythical past. Produced just three years after the important and controversial reforms to the composition and duties of the Areopagos council (462/1), Aeschylus boldly depicts the original creation of this same council in this play. Athene, the city's patron goddess, selects the "finest of [her] citizens" (line 487) to sit as jurors in the trial of Orestes for murder and at lines 681–710 pronounces their formal mandate. The court proceedings themselves closely mirror the actual process as it was conducted at Athens, from the initial discovery that Athene undertakes with the disputants through to the trial's conclusion. Aeschylus does not come down for or against the reforms of the Areopagos Council, but the dramatic effect of its institution is heightened against the contemporary background.

Earlier in this same play (289–91), Orestes offers a pledge to bind Argos in eternal friendship to Athens, which he later reiterates at greater length in the form of an oath in response to his acquittal on the charge of murder (762–74). Athens and Argos had a few years early concluded a treaty that bound them together as allies. On one level, then, historical reality is back-dated and justified by a reworking of myth in the context of drama. Argos is presented as a metaphorical lost sheep who has finally returned to the fold, its former alliance with Sparta to be excused, since its debt to Athens, because of Orestes' acquittal, has finally been honored. All is now as it was intended to be from ancient times.

Other tragedians have also been seen to bring contemporary issues before the audience in the guise of old myths. Euripides' *Trojan Women* has frequently been read as a critique of Athens' inhumane treatment of the citizens of Melos in 416 or alternately as a reaction to the feverish preparations for the massive armada against Sicily. For some the Theban refusal to allow immediate burial of the Athenian dead at the battle of Delion in 424 was the inspiration for Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, in which the bodies of the Argive dead lie unburied at Thebes. Many critics have seen, beneath

Oedipus in Sophokles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the figure of Perikles, at that time the leading political force at Athens. However, hunting for allusions to these events in every extant tragedy has not proven to be a particularly productive task. Lurking beneath this discussion is the question of whether a specific issue or person in contemporary Athens "inspired" a playwright to choose a particular mythical subject or to develop that subject in a certain way. Redfield (1990: 325–6) argues cogently that the poets relied on the spectators' contemporary experience to make the dramatic situation more believable: "Oidipous in the *Tyrannos* is like Perikles . . . not because Sophokles intended a point about Perikles, but rather (I am suggesting) because he relied on his audience's understanding of Perikles to create for them a believable Oidipous."

Evidence of the relationship between the *polis* and tragic drama has been more fruitfully found in the study of the plays' engagement with the governing political institutions of the *polis*: the law-courts, assemblies, and councils. In the law courts, prosecution and defense were competitors in a contest (*agōn*), who must through persuasive argumentation convince as many people as possible of the rightness or justice of their position. Similarly in both the assembly and the council, where the number of competing voices might be many, men would propose a course of action, entertain counter-proposals, debate their individual merits, and otherwise engage each other in matters of importance to the city, ultimately voting to accept or reject a proposition as "right" or "not right" for the *polis* respectively.

Such contests of words had long been a part of Greek political practice, as evidenced in the epic tales of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, while the responsibility for those in positions of power to govern well and choose rightly was divinely mandated by Zeus (as at Hesiod *Works and Days* 225–47). The decision-making process had long been established as a collective one. In the leaders' council of the *Iliad* (9.9–79), any member was free to put forward a proposal which the council would either endorse or reject as seemed proper. Thus whether an audience member at the City Dionysia was an Athenian or a visitor from another Greek *polis*, he would have had some familiarity with these types of decision-making bodies and processes.

Both tragic and comic texts reveal their indebtedness to these political institutions in the way they employ argument and counter-argument, leading to a decision which moves their plots forward. Audience members, familiar with this sequence of events through participation in their city's assembly, council and courts, would have been encouraged through this familiarity to listen and judge the matter of the drama in the same manner as they would at those other venues. But there was one crucial difference. The dramas that they witnessed revealed the outcome of the decision made, permitting them to re-evaluate the rightness of the course of action taken, which, according to one view, turned tragic drama into a type of teaching tool for the hazards of ill-informed and short-sighted decision-making and comic drama into a farcical lesson in political (in)correctness.

But drama could deal with less obviously "political" institutions, those governing marriage and inheritance, interstate relationships and treaties, the guest-host obligations of *xenia*, each based on long-established norms of reciprocity and an ethical imperative that demanded that one "help one's friends and harm one's enemies." In both genres, but especially in tragedy, honoring the obligations of these long-standing

socio-political institutions becomes problematic in particular situations and here we shift from a consideration of the political institutions in drama to a discussion of political issues in dramatic content.

Probably the most common of themes in tragedy is that of justice (*dikē*), which underlies every surviving play to a greater or lesser degree. The question, “where does justice lie in this situation?” is raised in Euripides’ *Medea* and *Andromache*, for instance, or Sophokles’ *Ajax* and Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in relation to the bonds of marriage and the responsibility of parents to children. In *Ajax* and Sophokles’ *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* as well as Euripides’ *Orestes*, *Hecuba*, and *Suppliant Women* (to name only three) the justice of the Greek ethical imperative to “help friends and harm enemies” is rendered problematic for it conflicts with the institution of *xenia* (the guest–host relationship). Thus the needs and obligations to friend and family are set against those of the community at large, and ask the larger question of which socio-political institutions should take precedence in a given situation. These problems may be presented in the familiar story-line of myth, but can be easily extrapolated to apply to matters of importance to the contemporary audience where these same institutions give expression to civic values and shape the appropriate modes of civic behavior. But the assessment of how well or poorly one treats one’s friends depends on how one’s friends are defined. The assessment of whether one is legally married or one’s children legal citizens is determined by the laws of the city. For the citizen in any *polis* personal decisions have political implications and consequences. Tragic drama exploits these to great effect, providing a forum in which to assess the justness of the contrary demands placed on the individual and so to reassess the definitions and demands that are the source of problems in the city.

Drama and democracy

Tragedy, then, has a great deal in it that we would identify as political content. But to what degree can this content be called primarily or specifically “democratic” in orientation rather than about the *polis* in more general terms? This question has become a major subject of debate. We know that the audience at the City Dionysia was not wholly Athenian, but included visitors from other Greek *poleis*. We also know that tragedies were exported and performed in a number of cities whose constitutions were anything but democratic. Those who hold that the City Dionysia’s tragedies were more general in their politics than specifically democratic make use of these two facts (among others) in support of their position. Carter (2004:14), for instance, argues that of our thirty-one extant tragedies only Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* and *Suppliants* and Euripides’ *Suppliant Women* and *Orestes* present governing institutions as democratic, while Aeschylus’ *Persians* and Euripides’ *Children of Herakles* engage in “the explicit promotion of democratic ideology.”

On the other side, those who hold that that this genre was especially democratic in orientation point to the fact that the majority of our extant dramas comes from a period when Athens was a radical democracy, in which the Athenians took great pride. In fact, Athens is never berated in tragedy. In the choral odes of all the playwrights, Athens is always presented as the ideal city. It is the preferred destination of

refugees as a city that welcomes and protects its suppliants, even to the point of going to war to defend them. It is the place where justice prevails over personal vendetta and where its king seeks the will of the people rather than ruling by fiat. When Athenians behave badly or unfortunately, the setting is usually not Athens (e.g., Kreousa at Delphi in *Ion*, Theseus at Troizen in *Hippolytos*). But are these observations in the tragic texts anything more than an extension of the self-promoting program of the festival's first day?

Proponents of a decidedly "democratic" political content in tragedy may be on firmer ground when they observe that the twin principles of *isonomia* ("equality before the law") and *parrhēsia* ("freedom to speak") on which democracy was founded, and which became by-words for democracy itself, find expression in the tragedies. Despite Hecuba's belief in the culpability of Helen, she insists that Menelaos at least listen to Helen's argument in defense of her own actions (*Trojan Women* 906–10). On the other hand Elektra, in Sophokles' play of that name, suggests that Aigisthos should be denied the right to speak before his execution, for there is nothing he could say which would alter her hatred of him (1484–90). When in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* Pelasgos is faced with the difficult decision of deciding whether to accept and thus defend his distant relatives, the Danaids, he insists (365–9) that even though he is king, he must put the matter before the people, an anachronistic projection of democratic practice into the mythical past of Argos. Similarly Euripides anachronistically has Tyndareus suggest that Orestes could have had his mother prosecuted for the murder of his father rather than dispatching her himself (*Orestes* 492–5). Later in this same play Orestes' guilt is debated in assembly, where even a lowly farmer is permitted to offer his opinion on the matter and propose an appropriate course of action (917–30). The benefits of citizenship in a democratic *polis* are more directly highlighted in a debate between Theseus, Athens' legendary king, with a Theban herald who supports monarchy (*Suppliant Women* 395–510). The examples could be multiplied.

However, in these last two examples, both from Euripides, the pitfalls of democracy are also given expression. The members of judicial assembly called together to decide on Orestes' guilt and punishment are shown to be driven by differing vested interests, while the verdict is arrived at through a combination of immoral argument and intimidation. Similarly the Theban herald's critique of the democratic process draws attention to the problem that both personal and factional interest pose to good governance and decision-making. For some this apparent freedom to question the values and institutions of the Athenian *polis* in the guise of the mythological re-enactments of tragedy and the farcical representations in comedy serves as evidence that the content of both genres was specifically democratic. We do not know whether this public challenging of normally unquestioned values and practices was always part of tragic drama at the City Dionysia. But we might suspect it was, given that the City Dionysia, like the Lenaia, was also a period of "sacred time" in which liberties not normally granted to citizens were made available. Part of the reason why tragedy in the fifth century had the liberty to address political issues in the form it did, may be located in the fact that the festival took Dionysos Eleuthereus as its patron.

One of the reasons why this debate over the political nature of the content of Athenian tragedy continues, is that it has proven difficult to reconcile what is known to have been a deeply emotional experience for the audience, with the more cerebral

instruction in democratic decision-making that is often proposed. On the latter argument the spectators would be watching their tragedies as though they were at a meeting of the assembly or sitting as jurors in a court case, keeping their emotional engagement in check and viewing and assessing the words and actions in a highly intellectual and disaffected manner. However, contrary to modern expectation, the political deliberations conducted in these two institutions were far from emotionless, high-minded, intellectual discussions. The emotions most engaged and exploited by tragedy (especially pity and fear) and comedy (especially anger and indignation) were precisely the emotions called upon in the assessment of arguments presented in the democratic institutions of the assembly and law-courts (Rosenbloom 2012). Because pity and indignation each have a cognitive component that involves the moral assessment of the agent, the action and the result upon which one's response to them is based, they are appropriate and indeed necessary for effective deliberation and the exercise of justice. By arousing these emotions, the playwrights thus offered their Athenian audience members the pleasurable opportunity to flex their emotionally informed deliberative skills without having to implement and live with the consequences of an actual decision.

Clearly there is nothing especially democratic about these emotions in themselves, and citizens of other *poleis* may well have had their pity, fear, anger, and indignation aroused by very different aspects of a comedy or tragedy than would their Athenian counterparts. But they could experience the pleasure of being emotionally and intellectually stimulated by what they had seen and heard at the City Dionysia. This helps to explain why both genres appealed to audiences outside of Athens whose constitutions were less democratic and even undemocratic. However, although this expanded perspective on the relationship between the drama and Athenian political processes serves to enhance our understanding of the importance of City Dionysia for the Athenians, it does not allow us to conclude that the "politics" of tragedy were specifically democratic rather than more generally "about the *polis*." The debate is likely to continue for some time.

Recommended Reading

Greek drama

- Csapo and Slater 1995: A very useful English translation of the documentary evidence for Greek and Roman drama (literary, inscriptional, artistic), with preliminary discussions and some illustrations.
- Easterling and Knox 1985: Contains informative essays by a number of leading scholars in the field, pitched at the level of the non-expert.
- Sommerstein 2002: The first half provides a basic survey of the history of Greek drama and dramatists. The second half contains an anthology of ancient texts and a useful annotated bibliography.
- Walcot 1976: An insightful and sensitive discussion of both the performance conventions and the social background of Greek drama.

- Winkler and Zeitlin 1990: A collection of more specialized essays on the larger aspects of Greek drama, dealing with matters of performance and the social context.

Greek theater

- Dugdale 2008: A very useful little book, designed for students and instructors of Greek theater and full of informative comment with many plans and illustrations.
- McDonald and Walton 2007: A good collection of specialized essays, the first group covering “text in context,” the second “the nature of performance.”
- Rehm 1992: A leading scholar and practitioner of Greek theater, Rehm studies how Greek tragedy worked. He first discusses Athens as a “performance culture,” and then four specific tragedies to illustrate his analysis.
- Taplin 1978: One of the first major contributors to performance theory, Taplin discusses various aspects of how Greek tragedy was staged, using three plays by each tragedian as templates for his discussion.
- Wiles 2000: One of the leaders in the field of Greek theater, Wiles presents several provocative essays on the subject, social background, and later reception of Greek drama in production.

Greek drama (visual)

- Bieber 1961: A massive and well-illustrated assemblage of material on the ancient theater. Much new evidence has appeared since 1961 and new conclusions reached, but this is still a useful collection to have under one cover.
- Green and Handley 1995: A brief collection of images, based principally (but not exclusively) on material in the British Museum. Covers the visual evidence from the ancient theaters, inscriptions, sculpture, and vases.
- Taplin 1993: The initial study of vases illustrating the production of tragedy and especially comedy, arguing that the so-called *phlyax-vases* display scenes from Athenian comedy.
- Trendall and Webster 1971: A collection of nearly 200 items, mostly vases and terracotta statuettes, covering pre-dramatic monuments, tragedy, satyr-drama, and comedy, each entry with picture(s) and commentary.

Drama and dionysos

- Csapo and Miller 2007: An insightful collection of essays on the early history of Greek drama and the rituals of Dionysos, with special emphasis on the visual and archaeological evidence.
- Goldhill 1987: A response to Taplin’s claim (1978) that “there is nothing intrinsically Dionysiac about Greek tragedy,” by arguing that the festival of Dionysos allowed poets to exploit tensions within the *polis*.

- Wiles 2007: A theoretical study of masks and the wearing of masks in ancient Greece, followed by practical examples of the use of masks in modern productions.

Drama and politics

- Carter 2004: A qualification of Goldhill's thesis (1987) on the political nature of tragedy, showing that Athenian tragedy travelled well to states that were not democracies.
- Carter 2011: Sixteen useful essays by leaders in the field, arranged in six sections ("context," "discourse," "choruses," "families," "suppliants," "Athens and Greece"), each with a summary and a response.
- Griffin 1998: A rejection of attempts to see tragedy as expressing the aims and methods of the civic democracy at Athens, preferring to regard tragedy as entertainment.
- Rosenbloom 2012: A study of drama and democracy from the point of view of the dominant emotions of pity, fear, anger, and indignation, which are fundamental both to democracy and to drama.
- Seaford 2000: A response to Griffin's (1998), Seaford argues that tragedy provided not only a communal emotional response but also a resolution of the tension between tyranny and democracy.