

Aspects of Ancient Greek Drama

Drama

The history of Western drama begins in the mid-sixth century at Athens. The high period of Greek drama runs from the sixth to the mid-third century, with special attention paid to the fifth century, when most of the plays that we possess were produced. We shall be concerned with the three distinct genres of Greek drama: serious drama or **tragedy** (instituted traditionally in 534), **satyr-drama** (added ca. 500), and **comedy** (which began formally at Athens in 486, but which flourished at the same time in Syracuse also).

Drama is action. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1448a28), dramatic poets “represent people in action,” as opposed to a third-person narrative or the mixture of narrative and direct speech as done by Homer. We begin, then, appropriately enough with a Greek word, δράμα (*drama*), which means “action,” “doing,” “performance.” According to Aristotle, the verb *dran* was not an Attic term (“Attic” being the dialect spoken at Athens), Athenians preferring to use the verb *prattein* and its cognates (*pragma*, *praxis*) to signify “action” or “performance.” Whether this was true or not does not matter here – that *dran* is common in Athenian tragedy, but not in the prose writers, may support Aristotle’s assertion. For both Plato and Aristotle, the two great philosophers of the fourth century, drama is an example of *mimesis*, “imitation” or “representation,” but each took a different view of the matter. (*Mimesis* is not an easy word to render in English. Neither “imitation” nor “representation” really gets the point. We have left it in Greek transliteration.) For Plato *mimesis* was something to be discredited, something inferior, which the ideal ruler of an 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 even that of a slave or a woman. Plato would have agreed with Polonius in *Hamlet*, “to thine own self be true.” But Aristotle found in *mimesis* not only something natural in human nature but also something that was a pleasure and essential for human learning (*Poetics* 1448b5–9):

to engage in *mimesis* 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 *mimesis* and because all humans enjoy mimetic activities.

Drama then is “doing” or “performance,” and in human cultures performances can be used in all sorts of ways. Religion and ritual immediately spring to mind as one context: the elaborate dances of the Shakers; the complex rituals of the Navaho peoples; the mediaeval mystery plays, which for a largely illiterate society would provide a venue for religious instruction and ritual reenactment, as well as for entertainment. Drama can also encompass “science” – the dances of the Navaho provide both a history of the creation of the world and a series of elaborate healing rituals. Drama and performance will often keep historical events alive – here “legend” is a better term than “myth,” for legend is based on some real “historical” events, elaborated admittedly out of recognition, but real nonetheless. Greek tragedy falls partly into this category, since its themes and subjects are for the most part drawn from the heroic age, an idealized time about a thousand years before the classical age. 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 in classical Greece. An extreme example of the history-drama is the history-plays of Shakespeare, in particular his *Richard III*, which is based on the Tudor propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting the last of the Plantagenets. Drama can be used to provide moral instruction. The Mystery Plays in part reiterated the message of the Christian gospel, while the Ramlila plays celebrate the triumph of love and loyalty over evil and lust. And finally humans enjoy both acting in and watching performances. Aristotle is quite right to insist that *mimesis* is both innate to humanity and the source of natural pleasure. We go to the theater or watch formal performances because they give us pleasure, a diversion from the routine, the enjoyment of watching a story-line unfold and engaging with the characters, and the emotional experience involved.

Above all we enjoy hearing or watching a story unfold. The child will ask, “And then what happened?” Indeed Aristotle (*Poetics* chapter 6) will insist that *mythos* (“plot”) is the most important part of a Greek tragedy. For the Greeks drama (performance) came later than the purely narrative relation of a story. The sequence would seem to have been purely oral narrative by the bards; the Homeric epics (eighth century), which, as Aristotle points out (*Poetics* 1448a21), do not provide pure narration, but a mixture of narration and direct speech; finally actual dramatic performance.

Another crucial term is “theater.” *Thea-* in Greek means “observe,” “watch” (related also to “theory” as the result of mental contemplation), and while we speak of an “audience” and an “auditorium” (from the Latin *audire*, “to hear”), the ancients talked of “watchers,” “spectators,” and the “watching-place.” The noun *theatron* (“theater”) refers both to the physical area where the plays were staged, more specifically here 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 the audience in that building. Comedy, which was fond of breaking the dramatic illusion, refers directly to *theatai* (“watchers”) and a related term *theomenoi* (“those watching”).

In modern critical discussions a distinction is made between the academic studies of “drama” and “theater.” A university course or a textbook on “Drama” tends to concentrate more on the text that was performed, that is the words of the text that are recited or read. This approach takes the plays as literature and subjects them to the various sorts of literary theory that exist, and often runs 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 becomes part of a larger literary approach to drama, and can easily become part of a course on 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. Mark Fortier writes well:

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 among these elements . . . 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 in a public setting, in a theater placed next to the shrine of a god and as part of the worship 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 very existence as spectators.

This is meant to be a guide to Greek *Drama*, rather than to Greek theatrical practice. There have been many first-rate studies over the past twenty years that have called our attention to much more than the words on the stage (or page) to be understood. Our principal concern will be the texts themselves and their authors – and, although such an approach may be somewhat out of date, to 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 an ancient theatrical experience can also assist with understanding the text, why certain scenes are written the way they are, why certain characters must leave and enter when they do, why crucial events are narrated rather than depicted.

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

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 great epic poems in the heroic manner, *Iliad* (about Achilles, the great Greek hero of the Trojan War) and *Odyssey* (the return of Odysseus [Ulysses] from that war), did much to provide standard versions of the myths of both gods and men. Homer is the great poet of classical Greece, and his epics (along with those that we call the “epic cycle” – in addition to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which we possess, there were several other poems [certainly later than Homer] that completed the story of the Trojan War as well as another complete cycle relating the epic events at Thebes) formed the backdrop to so much later Greek literature, including the dramatists. They would take much of the language, characters, and plots from Homer – Aeschylus is described as serving up “slices from the banquet of Homer,” and the dramatic critic needs to have one eye on Homer at all times, to see what use the poets are making of his seminal material. For example, Homer created a brilliantly whole and sympathetic, if a somewhat unconventional, character in his Odysseus, but for the dramatists of the fifth century Odysseus becomes a one-sided figure: the paragon of clever talk and deceit, the concocter of evil schemes, and in one instance (Sophokles’ *Ajax*) the embodiment of a new and enlightened sort of heroism. Homer’s Achilles is one of the great explorations of what it means to be a truly “tragic” hero, a man whose pursuit of honor leads to the death of his dearest friend and ultimately his own, but when he appears in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, we behold an ineffective youth, full of sound and fury, unable to rescue the damsel in distress. Of the surviving thirty-three plays attributed to the tragedians, only two directly overlap with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Euripides’ satyr-drama *Cyclops* and *Rhesos* of doubtful authenticity), but we know that several of the lost plays did dramatize Homeric material. Homer may be three centuries earlier than the tragedians of the fifth century, but his influence upon them was seminal. 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 depict people and stories not of their own time, but of an earlier, lost, and 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 groups 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–ca. 440), who took the traditional tales from myth and retold them in smaller chunks, with an effort to vary the material that they had inherited. And they used a different meter from Homer, not the epic hexameter sung (chanted?) by a single bard, but elaborate “lyric” meters, intended to be sung by large choruses. None of Stesichoros’ poems has survived intact, but we know of a poem on the Theban story, one of the favorite themes of tragedy; an *Oresteia* (with significant points of contact with Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*); and a retelling of the story of Helen that Euripides will take up wholesale in his *Helen*. One poem by Bacchylides tells the story of

Herakles' death at the hands of his wife in much the same fashion that Sophokles dramatizes in his *Trachinian Women* (it is not clear whether Bacchylides' poem or Sophokles' tragedy is the earlier work) and Pindar in *Pythian* 11 (474) will anticipate Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458) by speculating about the various motives of Klytaimestra for killing her husband.

Drama and Athens

We shall be concerned principally with the dramas that were written and performed at Athens, for us the best-known city of the ancient Greek world. But theaters were not exclusive to Athens. A reasonably sized theater of the fifth century can be seen at Argos, and Syracuse, the greatest of the Greek states on Sicily, certainly had an elaborate theater and a tradition of comedy in the early fifth century. In the fourth century a theater was a *sine qua non* of every Greek city-state, however small, and the production of plays was an international practice throughout the Greek, and later through the Roman world. During Alexander's great expedition to the East, we know of theatrical performances staged for the entertainment of his army. But it was at Athens in the late sixth and early fifth centuries that the three genres of drama were first formalized in public competitions.

Why did formal drama develop at Athens and not, say, at Corinth or Samos, both major city-states of the sixth century and centers of culture? It is important to remember that during the sixth century Athens was not the leading city of the Greek world, politically, militarily, economically, or culturally, that she would become in the fifth century. The leading states of the sixth century in the Greek homeland were Sparta, Corinth, Sikyon, and Samos. Athens was an important city, but not really in the same league as these others. By the early sixth century Athens had brought under her central control the region called "Attica" – the actual Greek is "the Attic (land)." This is a triangular peninsula roughly forty miles in length from the height of land that divides Boiotia (dominated by Thebes) from Attica 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, twenty-six miles and change, the distance run by the runner announcing the victory at Marathon in 490 and that of the modern Marathon race today. 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" (figure 1.1) became a standard coinage of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Coupled with this economic advance was the political situation in the late sixth century. The Greeks of the seventh and sixth centuries experienced an uneasy mix of hereditary monarchy, factional aristocracy, popular unrest (at Athens especially over



Map 1.1 *Map of Attica*

debts and the loss of freedom), and what they called “tyranny.” To us “tyrant” is a pejorative term, like “dictator,” but in Archaic Greece it meant “one-man rule,” usually where that one man had made himself ruler, often rescuing a state from an internal *stasis* (“civil unrest”). In some versions of the “seven sages” of ancient Greece, the traditional wise men, as many as four tyrants were included. At Athens the tyrant Peisistratos seized power permanently in the mid-540s. He ruled to his death in 528/7, and was succeeded by his son Hippias, who was expelled from Athens in 510 by an alliance of exiled aristocrats and the Spartan kings.



Figure 1.1 *Obverse (Athene) and reverse (owl) of two Athenian tetradrachms, ca. 480. In the collection of the Department of Ancient History & Classics, Trent University. Photo by Mike Cullen, Trent Photographics.*

In the fifth century “tyrant” was a dirty word, used in political in-fighting as an accusation to pillory an opponent, and the first use of the practice of ostracism (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 in fact 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 particularly bitter economic class-conflict in the early sixth century, attracted artists to their court at Athens, including the major poets Anakreon, Simonides, and Bacchylides, 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 great celebration of Athene and of Athens, and instituted contests for the recitation of the Homeric poems, establishing incidentally the first “official” text of Homer. What the tyrants did was to quell discontent and divisions within the state and instill a communal sense of ethnic identity that paved the way for Athens’ greatness in the next century. One other act of the tyrants was the creation of a single festival of Dionysos at Athens, the City Dionysia, which overrode all the local festivals and created one official celebration for the people of Attica. It was at this festival that tragedy was first performed.

In this place and against this background drama develops, tragedy first of all, traditionally dated to 534 and thus part of the cultural program of the tyranny, later satyr-play, and finally comedy. We shall see that drama evolved from some sort of choral performance, a melding of song and dance, allegedly the dithyramb for tragedy, dancing satyrs for satyr-drama, and perhaps animal-choruses, phallic dancers, or padded dancers for comedy. The exact details of this development remain obscure, and we can give no firm answer to the question: why Athens? Corinth, for example,

was an even more prosperous city in the sixth century and had flourished under its tyranny. Samos under the tyrant Polykrates in the 520s enjoyed a brilliant artistic life, but it was at Athens that drama first emerged as a distinct art-form.

The time-frame

The traditional date for the formal introduction of a dramatic form (tragedy) is given as 534 and linked with the shadowy figure of Thespis. For some the evidence for this date is not compelling and a rather lower date (ca. 500) is preferred – the matter will be discussed more fully later. Clearly tragedy was not “invented” overnight and we should postulate some sort of choral performances in the sixth century developing into what would be called “tragedy.” Thus we begin our study of drama in the sixth century, even though the first extant play (Aeschylus’ *Persians*) belongs to 472. Like any form of art, drama has its periods, each with its own style and leading poets. The period we know best is that which corresponds with Athens’ ascendancy in the Greek world (479–404), from which we have thirty tragedies, one satyr-drama, one quasi-satyr-drama, and nine comedies, as well as a wealth of fragments and *testimonia* about lost plays and authors. But drama continued through the fourth century and well into the third. New tragedies continued to be written and performed in the fourth century, but along with the new arose a fascination with the old, and competitions were widened to include an “old” performance. 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 strongly that satyr-drama is a later addition to the dramatic festivals; most scholars accept a date of introduction of ca. 501. Thus satyr-drama is not the primitive dramatic form from which tragedy would develop. In the fifth century satyr-drama would accompany the performance of the three tragedies by each of the competing playwrights, 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.

Comedy began later than tragedy and satyr-drama, the canonical first 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 about comedy at Syracuse in the early fifth century and about something from the same period called “Megarian comedy.”

Dates in the history of Greek drama

ca. 600 – Arion “invents” the dithyramb

534 – first official performance of tragedy at Athens (Thespis)

ca. 501 – reorganization of the festival; first official satyr-drama

Continued

498 – début of Aeschylus
486 – first official performance of comedy
468 – début of Sophokles
456 – death of Aeschylus
455 – début of Euripides
ca. 440 – introduction of dramatic competitions at the Lenaia
427 – début of Aristophanes
407 – death of Euripides
406 – death of Sophokles
ca. 385 – death of Aristophanes
ca. 330 – building of the stone theater at Athens
325 or 321 – début of Menander
290 – death of Menander

The evidence

We face two distinct problems in approaching the study of Greek drama: the distance in time and culture, and the sheer loss of evidence. In some instances we are dealing with texts that are nearly 2,500 years removed from our own, in a different language and produced for an audience with cultural assumptions very different in some ways 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 modern “classic” such as Shakespeare or a contemporary drama.

The actual evidence is of four sorts: literary texts, literary *testimonia*, physical remains of theaters, and visual representations of theatrical scenes. The manuscript tradition and discoveries on papyrus have yielded to date 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 would like to think 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 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 out of over a hundred. On what grounds were these selections made, by whom, for whom, and when? Are these selected plays representative of their author’s larger opus? In the case of Euripides we have both a selected collection of ten plays and an alphabetical sequence of nine plays that may be more indicative of his work as a whole.

We do not possess anything at all resembling the folios and quartos of Shakespeare, nor anything remotely close to the scripts of the original production or to the “official” texts that were established by Lykourgos ca. 330 and which 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. Dionysos in *Frogs* (405) talks blithely of "sitting on his ship reading [Euripides'] *Andromeda*" and we do know of book-stalls in the fifth century, but these would not have been elaborate "books" in our sense of the word, but very basic texts allowing the reader to re-create 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 later additions to the text. But they are what we have, and we must make the most of them.

In addition to the actual play texts, we have a considerable amount of literary *testimonia* about the dramatic tradition generally and about individual plays and personalities. Most important is Aristotle's *Poetics*, a sketchily written treatise dating from ca. 330, principally on tragedy and epic, but with some general introductory comments on drama. Aristotle was himself not an Athenian by birth, although resident for many years there, and was writing a hundred years after the great 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 did see actual plays performed in the theater, both new dramas of the fourth century and the old dramas of the masters, and he did have access to much documentary material that we lack. An early work of Aristotle's was his *Production Lists*, the records of the productions and victories from the inception of the contests ca. 501. He would have known 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 history of the genre? Was he, at times, just making an educated guess? When Aristotle makes a pronouncement, we need both 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 hard to follow and also controversial: the "end" of tragedy is a *katharsis* of pity and fear, one can have a tragedy without character but not without plot, the best tragic characters are those who fall into misfortune through some *hamartia*. (*Hamartia* is another battleground. When mistranslated as "tragic flaw," it tends to give Greek tragedy an emphasis on character. It is better rendered as "mistake," and as such restores Aristotle's emphasis on plot.)

Other useful later sources include the Attic orators of the fourth century, who often cite from the tragic poets to make a rhetorical point. 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*. The fourth book of the *Onomasticon* ("Thesaurus") by Pollux (second century AD) contains much that is useful

about the ancient theater, especially a list and description of the masks employed to designate certain type characters of comedy. The Roman architectural writer, Vitruvius (first century AD), has much to say about theatrical buildings especially of the Hellenistic period. Much of what we possess of the lost plays comes in quotations from a wide variety of ancient and mediaeval writers. Two in particular are useful for the student of drama: the learned Athenaios (second century AD), whose *Experts at Dining* contains a treasury of citations, and Stobaios (fourth–fifth century AD), a collector of quotable passages. The first-century AD scholar, Dion of Prusa, has shed light on the three tragedies on the subject of Philoktetes and the bow of Herakles, by summarizing the plots and styles of all three – we possess only the version by Sophokles (409).

Inscriptions provide another source of written evidence. The ancients loved to post publicly their decrees, rolls of officials, and records of competitions. One inscription contains a partial list of the victors at the Dionysia in dithyramb, comedy, and tragedy (*IG ii² 2318*), while another presents the tragic and comic victors at both festivals in order of their first victory (*IG ii² 2325*), and a Roman inscription lists the various victories of Kallias, a comedian of the 430s, in order of finish (first through fifth). Another group of inscriptions gives invaluable details about the contests at the Dionysia for 341, 340, and 311, including the information that satyr-drama by 340 was performed separately at the start of the festival. Another inscription from the second century records a series of productions starring an individual actor.

On the purely physical front, 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 and barely known. The actual physical details of a Greek theater will be discussed later, but some general comments are appropriate here. Most of the theaters are not in their fifth-century condition – major rebuilding took place in the fourth century, in the Hellenistic period (300–30), and especially under Roman occupation. When the tourist or the student visits Athens today, the theater that he or she sees (figure 1.2) is not the structure that Aeschylus or Aristophanes knew. We see curved stone seats, individual “thrones” in the front row, a paved *orchestra* floor, and an elaborate raised structure in the middle of the *orchestra*. The theater of the high classical period had straight benches on the hillside, an *orchestra* floor of packed earth (an *orchestra* that may not have been a perfect circle), and a wooden building at the back of the *orchestra*. We have been spoiled by the classical perfection of the famous theater at Epidauros (figure 1.7). At Athens and Syracuse the new theater replaced the old on the same site, while at Argos the impressive and large fourth-century theater (figure 1.9) was built on a new site, the fifth-century theater being more compact and straight rather than circular.

The theaters that we do have, from whatever period of Greek antiquity, do, however, shed invaluable light on the mechanics of production. Audiences were large and sat as a community in the open air – this was not theater of the private enclosed space. Distances were great – from the last row of the theater at Epidauros a performer in the *orchestra* would appear only inches high. Thus theater of the individual expression was out – impossible in fact since the performers wore masks. But acoustics



Figure 1.2 *Theater of Dionysos from above. Photo by Ian Vining.*

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 prominence and centrality of the *orchestra* 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 get representations of performances, usually marked by the presence of an *aulos*-player, and later scenes from tragedy, satyr-drama, and comedy.

There are not many scenes showing a self-conscious performance of tragedy; one vase ca. 430 does show a pair of performers preparing to dress as maenads (figure 1.11). But from 440 onward vases depict scenes clearly influenced by tragedy: the opening-scenes of *Libation-Bearers*, a series of vases depicting Sophokles' early tragedy *Andromeda*, another series reflecting Euripides' innovative *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* (figure 2.3), the Cleveland *Medea* (figure 2.4), and a striking fourth-century tableau illustrating the opening scenes of *Eumenides* (figure 1.3). One or two of these do show a pillar structure, which some interpret as an attempt to render the *skene* front. But these are not depicting an actual tragic performance. The characters do not wear masks, males are often shown nude (or nearly so) instead of wearing the elaborate costume of tragedy, and there is no hint of the *aulos*-player, a sure sign of a repre-



Figure 1.3 “*Orestes at Delphi*,” influenced by the opening scene of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, on an Apulian red-figure volute-krater, ca. 390–370. Reproduced courtesy of the Museo Nazionale, Naples (H 3249).

sentation of performance. For satyr-drama there is the superb Pronomos Vase (figure 3.1) from the very end of the fifth century, the equivalent of the modern movie poster, the performers of a satyr-drama by Demetrios in various degrees of their on-stage dress, accompanied by the *aulos*-player, Pronomos.

For comedy the vases show various sorts of performers of something which may have been the predecessor to what would become comedy, principally padded dancers in a celebration (*komos*) and men performing in animal-choruses. There is not much direct evidence from the fifth century. A 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 obviously humorous situations. For a long time these were thought to be representations of a local Italian low comedy called “phlyakes,” but it is now accepted that these reflect Athenian Old Comedy which, contrary to established belief, did travel and was reproduced in the Greek cities of southern Italy. Some of these vases show a raised stage with steps and the double door of drama, and are plainly illustrating an actual stage performance. The most famous of these are the Würzburg Telephos (figure 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 *Choregoi* vase (figure 4.2), which seems to show figures from both comedy and tragedy.

Sculptural representations of drama are much less common, but we do have a relief from the late fifth century featuring three actors holding masks before Dionysos and consort – some have conjectured that this is the cast of Euripides' prize-winning *Bacchae*. One rich source of visual evidence is terracotta masks from various periods that shed valuable light on the nature of comic masks. Scenes from the comedy of Menander (career: 325–290) were often part of the decoration of ancient houses, most notably the so-called “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 mosaics remain, with named characters that allow us to identify the exact scene in at least two comedies.

The Dramatic Festivals

At Athens drama was produced principally at two of the festivals honoring the god Dionysos, the Lenaia and the City Dionysia. We shall consider 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 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 (festivals held in the various local communities around Attica); the Lenaia in late January; the Anthesteria (“Flower Time”) in mid-February; and the City Dionysia in late March or early April. There is some evidence that previously performed plays could be restaged at the various celebrations of the Rural Dionysia around Attica, but the two principal festivals for the performance of drama were the Lenaia and the City Dionysia at Athens.

The City Dionysia occupied five days in the Athenian month of Elaphebolion (“Deer Hunt”), which corresponds to our late March or early April. It was one of the developments fostered by the tyrants, who ruled from the mid-540s to 510, a splendid festival of the city in honor of the god Dionysos, uniting all the rural festivals into one to be held within the city of Athens. The tyrants were clearly endeavoring to create a sense of national unity and cultural identity with such centralized institutions. For the City Dionysia, 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. Eleutherai had recently been joined to Attica, and thus would have been also an element of political propaganda. The festival was a holiday from normal civic business – the *ekklesia* (assembly) did not meet, legal proceedings were stayed (at least for the first day), prisoners were released from prison, and in the fourth century a fund was established to pay the admission charge of two obols for those who could not afford it.

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

The City Dionysia, ca. 430

Preliminaries:	8	Elaphebolion	Proagon
	9	Elaphebolion	“Introduction” of Dionysos
Events:	10	Elaphebolion	Parade (<i>pompe</i>)
			Dithyrambic contests (men & boys)
	11	Elaphebolion	Comic contest (5 poets, 1 play each)
	12	Elaphebolion	Tragedian A (3 tragedies, 1 satyr-drama)
	13	Elaphebolion	Tragedian B (3 tragedies, 1 satyr-drama)
	14	Elaphebolion	Tragedian C (3 tragedies, 1 satyr-drama)
			Awarding of the prizes, parade of the victors

At some point after the festival, a special session of the *ekklisia* was convened within the theater, rather than in its usual meeting-place on the Pnyx, to discuss the conduct of the festival for that year.

There has been considerable critical debate whether the number of comedies was cut from five to three during the Peloponnesian War (431–404) and whether the 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 was 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 “comedy,” 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 to three must argue that “us” means the theater generally, that the now refreshed spectator would be returning for a later tragedy. But any time that a comic chorus uses “us,” it is referring to its identity as a comic chorus and not as part of the general theatrical ensemble. It is usually assumed that comedy was reduced because of

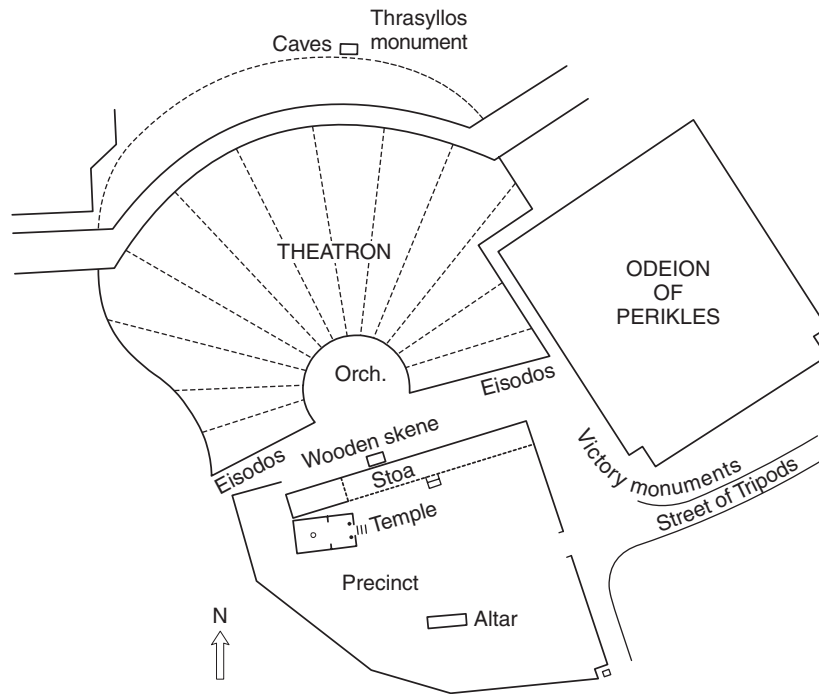


Figure 1.4 *The theater of Dionysos in the classical period*

the economic impact of 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 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 remove two plays was to free up fifty more Athenians for military service.

The dramatic competitions changed and developed over the next century, and an assortment of inscriptions yields valuable information about the dramatic presentations around 340, about which time the festival was being reorganized. By 340 the satyr-drama had been divorced 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 – we know of Euripides' *Iphigeneia* in 341, his *Orestes* in 340, and another of his plays in 339. In 341 the 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 are reduced to two plays each and only two actors. 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 dithyramps for men and boys

were still part of the Dionysia in 332–328 and lists the victors in the order: dithyramb, comedy, tragedy. We should conclude that that order remained the same in the fourth century, but with certain changes made to the dramatic productions.

Dionysia in 340

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

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, a celebration of the birth of Dionysos, or the ritual of *sparagmos* (eating the raw flesh of the prey). A parade on this occasion is attested with “jokes from the wagons,” that is, insults directed at the spectators, and 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 *agora* (“Dionysos-in-the-Marshes”), where the theater itself would 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. This seems to have been the lesser festival, and it is sometimes assumed that newcomers would try their hand first at the Lenaia before producing at the more important Dionysia. Eratosthenes, a scholar at Alexandria in the third century, seems to suggest that the Lenaia was not considered on the same level as the Dionysia and that a relegation system was in operation (*POxy.* 2737. ii. 10–17):

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, Theater Police (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 the comic poet, active 424–380, usually spelled “Platon” to prevent confusion.)

But this may just be the conclusion of Eratosthenes, based on the *didaskalia* (“production records”), which may have shown Platon finishing fourth at a Dionysia of one year and then producing only at the Lenaia of the next year.

In *Acharnians* (425) the main character declares that “this is the contest at the Lenaia, and we are by ourselves,” that is, only Athenians and resident foreigners (*metoikoi*) were present, while the Dionysia marked the reopening of travel by sea, the arrival of embassies, and the bringing of the tribute by the allies to Athens and would thus have had a more international audience. At the Lenaia non-Athenians could perform as dancers and act as *choregoi* (see below), something that was not allowed at the more formal 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. We have no firm evidence for the number of plays produced. An inscription of 418 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. Evidence from two Roman inscriptions suggests 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 (“demes,” 139 in the classical period) of Attica, and there is considerable evidence for the performance of dithyramb, tragedy, and comedy in at least fifteen of the demes, principally the larger of them such as Acharnai, Eleusis, and Ikarion. A small deme theater is extant at Thorikos (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 tells of the theater-mad spectator, who is able to attend one Rural Dionysia after another. In 405 both Aristophanes and Sophokles are recorded as producing drama at a celebration of the Dionysia in Eleusis. One suspects that these productions would be revivals or repeats of earlier plays produced at the major festivals at Athens, to allow those unable to travel to the city to see the plays that they had missed. These were, like the festivals in the city, competitions. The evidence suggests that various deme-theaters preferred one genre or another: Aixone, Rhamnous, and Anagyros seem to have staged only comedy, while Paiania was restricted to tragedy. All three competitions (dithyramb, tragedy, comedy) are known for Eleusis. A particularly interesting inscription from Eleusis comes from the last decade of the fifth century, which attests to a double *choregeia* (see below) and the victories of Sophokles and Aristophanes:

IG ii² 3090: *Gnathis son of Timokedes, Anaxandrides son of Timagoros won the victory as choregoi for comedy. Aristophanes was didaskalos. (They also won) another victory in tragedy, for which Sophokles was didaskalos.*

(The word *didaskalos* means “teacher” and is applied to the person who brings 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.)

We know from Aristophanes that the official command to start the performance was “Bring on your chorus.” Aspiring playwrights would apply to the official in charge

of the festival months in advance for a chorus and the technical term for acceptance 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 Athenian institutional year, which corresponds to our beginning of July, and would presumably 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 fr. 17)

The speaker here could be a *choregos*, another archon, or just possibly Tragedy herself.

When the poets were selected, the next duty of the archons was to find twenty *choregoi* for the twenty dithyrambic choruses, three *choregoi* for tragedy (one for each playwright), and five for comedy (again one for each competitor). The word *choregos* (plural: *choregoi*) 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” that would be needed. Thus the *choregos* was both providing the chorus and providing for its members. Providing a chorus was a duty (technical term: *leitourgia*, “liturgy”) of the very richest of Athenians, 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 *choregoi* as the splendid individuals who provided that entertainment. Peter 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 *choregoi* 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 recording with pride that in his frequent service as a *choregos* he has spent almost four times what a normal *choregos* might lay out.

Not all would-be *choregoi* 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 in his *Acharnians* (425-L) blasts a *choregos* named Antimachos for some sort of unfriendly behavior after the festival, and at *Peace* 1020–2 implies that the particular *choregos* of this comedy is somewhat less than generous. At Eupolis fr. 329 someone exclaims, “Have you ever met a more stingy *choregos*?” We can detect a comic stereotype here, the less than generous sponsor.

A *choregia* provided an opportunity for the *choregos* to revel in the splendor of his position. Such a moment of glory was part of their return for undertaking the expensive matter of sponsoring a dramatic performance. We know that Alkibiades (451–403) wore a special purple robe when he served as *choregos* and that Demosthenes in the 340s had prepared gold crowns and a tunic sewn with gold for his service as a dithyrambic *choregos*. In the victory-lists the name of the victorious *choregos* is given before that of the winning poet:

[for 473/2] comedy: Xenokleides was the *choregos*, Magnes the *didaskalos*; tragedy: Perikles of Cholargai was the *choregos*, Aeschylus the *didaskalos*.

Perhaps a modern equivalent is the announcement of the award for Best Picture at the Academy Awards, where the producer (often virtually unknown) accepts that award, rather than the high-profiled director or the leading actors. But in the public atmosphere at Athens the *choregos* was someone whom everyone would know – the *choregos* 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. Plato in his *Symposium* shows us the company of revelers at a victory-party for Agathon much the worse for wear on the next day.

A visible sign of a *choregos*' triumph was the erection of a permanent memorial to display the bronze tripod awarded to the winning *choregos*. These tripods were large (some over three meters high) and expensive (costing over 1,000 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,” and that it was one of the most prominent and favored walking areas of Athens. One of these monuments has survived in quite reasonable shape, that commemorating the victorious *choregos*, Lysikrates, in 334, and remains a popular tourist attraction just off Vironos Street in modern Athens. The monument of Thrasyillos (319) was an enclosure set into the hillside above the theater and closed with elaborate gates (figure 1.5).

Of the three genres of performance at the Dionysia it is the sponsorship of tragedy that seems to have held the most prestige, although Demosthenes (21.156) insists that sponsoring a dithyramb was more expensive than tragedy. But here he is contrasting his own *choregia* with a dithyramb with the sponsorship of tragedy by his opponent Meidias. It is the sponsorship of tragedy that formed the highest rung of the liturgical ladder. At the City Dionysia of the year 406/5 two *choregoi* shared the expense of sponsoring the productions on that occasion. This was a time of financial hardship for Athens because of the loss of income from the silver mines, the need to import food



Figure 1.5 Theater of Dionysos, looking toward the Acropolis; the square recess is the Thrasyllus Monument. Photo by Ian Vining.

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 *choregia*.

We do not know how *choregoi* and poets were matched. For the dithyrambs the *choregos* would come from the tribe whose men or boys were competing, but for drama we cannot say whether the *choregos* had any say in the assignment. Some good evidence for the Thargelia, where dithyrambs were performed, informs us that the *choregos* received his poet by lot, but this may just mean that the *choregos* won the lot and was able to choose first. In some cases there does seem to be a close relationship between dramatist and *choregos*. In 476 Themistokles, the architect of the victory over the Persians in 480, acted as sponsor for the productions by Phrynichos which included his *Phoenician Women*, a tragedy that dramatized the story of the Athenian defeat of the Persians. In 472 the *choregos* 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 *choregos* for Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 458. In the third play of that trilogy Aeschylus brings in contemporary political attitudes and issues. What was Xenokles' stance on 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' *chore-*

gos share his hostility to aggressive war? How would a *choregos* 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 worldwide cultural events are awards ceremonies (the Academy Awards, the Palme d'Or in Cannes, the Emmy Awards for television, the Grammys for popular music, the Booker Prize for fiction etc.). We know also the ancient Greeks were an intensely competitive people, for whom the great cycles of competitions were major events in the life of that society. The Pythian Games at Delphi in fact began as competitions in music and poetry before the athletic competitions were added, and "music" loomed large in 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.

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 *strategoï* ("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 romantic to be true. The judges would take an oath to judge fairly – as do the two 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 4 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 would 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 *ekklesia* that examined the conduct of the competition.

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) chant 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 appeal 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 the reaction of the spectators 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 disgust. 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 an attempt to flatter every spectator to consider himself “clever.” Aristophanes seems to be appealing to the general theater-going public in his quest to redefine comedy. Aelian (in the 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 – the play finished third.

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 *choregos*, would have been awarded such a crown after the final production. We do not know whether the proclamation was made in the name of the winning chorus, poet, or *choregos*. Private celebrations clearly followed the public occasion; Plato's *Symposium* purports to be an account of the party following the actual victory-party. 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 impressionable boys, but we do know that the gymnasium were places where the community might gather and where an exuberant victor might well appear.

At *Frogs* 366–7 (405-L) the comic chorus declare 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, no doubt because of economic constraints. The comic poet interprets this proposal as motivated by personal reasons, but it is an unequivocal statement 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. Again this raises the question of the extent to which drama was "political" in that it was sponsored by the state.

Drama and Dionysos

"Religion" is probably not the best word to use when referring to the beliefs and worship of the ancient Greeks. To the modern ear the word conjures up 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" or "ethics." Greeks worshiped 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 *do ut des* ("I give so that you may give") lay behind the offering of sacrifices to the gods. We see this clearly in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* where 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 may see the opposite at Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* 911–23, where Jokaste enters with offerings for Apollo, the god of light and knowledge who operates beneath the surface 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 part of the festivals of Dionysos, particularly (as we have seen) at the Lenaia in late January and the larger 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),

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

that the dithyramb was connected 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* 367 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 *was* performed as part of the festivals of Dionysos and in the fourth century actors would describe themselves as “artists of Dionysos.” A number of questions immediately suggest themselves at this point:

- What sort of god was Dionysos and why should he have been the patron of drama?
- Did the writers, performers, and audience see themselves as engaging in a religious rite?
- Were the ancient dramas (especially tragedy) equivalent to the medieval mystery plays?
- Do these dramas have anything to do with formal religious rituals?
- 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 there anything “religious” about Greek drama?
- 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 attitude to him. But Dionysos is far more than a god of wine and the unrestrained party, he is an elemental force in the life of creation. 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 *dendrites*, “of trees,” and *anthios*, “of flowers”) and of the life force of animals. He is a god of growth and the power of youth.

Dionysos is a notoriously difficult deity to apprehend. He does go back to the late Bronze Age – his name has been found on the Linear B tablets ca. 1300 – and Homer does know the story of his encounter with Lykourgos (*Iliad* 6.130–40), but he was always the outsider in the world of the Olympians. In the standard version of his birth (told in Euripides’ *Bacchae*), he was the product 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 embryo, 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. He returns to Greece from the East, followed by his Eastern devotees, and must win his place as a new deity, bringing new rites for mankind.

Although a traditional Greek god with an impeccably Greek 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* (see below) 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 a confusing god, one who cannot be easily put in his place. He has often been set against Apollo, most notably by Nietzsche in his antithesis of the Apollonian (order, structure, light, intellect) and the Dionysian (chaos, darkness, emotion, instinct), and is associated with disguise and transformation. He is the god who breaks down boundaries (youth/age, male/female, human/animal, emotion/intellect), who confounds the norms, who drives women from the city to the mountain (in *Bacchae*), and who brings his own wildness and wild followers 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 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-animals, creatures that are more and less than human. In their wilder celebrations the worshipers 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 (*omophagia*). In *Bacchae* the messenger describes the women on the mountain, both in harmony and in control of nature. They nurse the young of wild animals, and with their *thyrsoi* produce milk and honey from the earth.

Dionysos is a god of the wild, the mountain as opposed to the city, a god of release from the normal routine (two of his most important titles are *eleuthereus*, "freer," and *lyaios* "releaser"). "City Dionysia" seems like a contradiction in terms, since Dionysos is a deity of the wild rather than the city, a god of the release from cultural constraints, but perhaps a "City Dionysia" was an attempt to rein in this potentially dangerous god and drama a means of channeling the emotional experience involved in his worship. The Athenians may well have been trying to temper and tame the wilder aspects of this god by organizing his rites within a City Dionysia, rites that included the performance of dithyrambic choral songs and of drama.

The myths about Dionysos reveal an interesting tension. Some show his power and devastating effect, often on those who reject his worship. Pentheus at Thebes is the

best-known example (the theme of 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 refuse to accept the rites of Dionysos and are punished with madness, made to kill their own children, and are transformed into animal guise. The *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos* tells how pirates attempted to kidnap the god, thinking him a prince worthy of ransom, and how the god transformed their ship into vines and the sailors into dolphins. The vine (*ampelos*) gets its name in one version from Ampelos, a beautiful youth and beloved of the god, who dies accidentally at Dionysos' hands, and from the god's tears falling on the boy's body grow the first vines and grapes. His cult was fundamentally opposed to the organized city and the rational order of the mind, two of the stereotypes that we associate with the ancient Greeks. Perhaps we can see why he was an outsider to the usual Greek way of looking at the world; he represented emotion and instinct as against intellect and conditioned 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, 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 depict the death of his victims, but he did also 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, as 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 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, which she gave to Zeus, who swallowed it, thereby taking the essence of Dionysos to himself. He subsequently makes Semele pregnant with Dionysos and the story continues as we know it. The Titans were destroyed by the fire-bolts of Zeus, and from their ashes came the race of human beings, thus 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, which 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 the wild rituals described above, the worshipers would lose their own identity, become possessed by the deity they worshiped, and thus achieve a sort of group mentality with one another. But here too lies the dangerous side of Dionysos, for he is essentially hostile to the concept of the individual and conducive of the collective. Although Dionysos was a dangerous pagan god in the official view of early Christianity, the parallels between his mythology and the experience of the early church are striking:

Born of the Sky-Father god and a human woman.
 Experienced a marvelous birth.
 Died and returned to life.
 Through the eating of flesh and drinking of wine, followers become *entheos* (“god within”) and achieve a “communion” with each other.
 Followers are promised happiness in the next life, by 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 put together 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 for whom drama was performed, who is shown in art as presiding over the festival, as on the Pronomos Vase (ca. 400) or a stone relief from the same period. 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 that survives the seats are inscribed “of the priest of . . .” As drama was under his patronage, the priest of Dionysos occupied a significant place in the *theatron* – 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 had control of the religious functions of the state. When the chorus at *Frogs* 686 describes itself as a “holy band,” it is speaking in more than its character as *mystai* (initiates), it is placing itself in the context of the religious occasion. The theater intruded upon the sacred precinct of Dionysos, and his temple stood closely beside and behind the *skene*, 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*, of course, and know of other plays with this title, and Aeschylus’ *Lykourgeia* will have dramatized Dionysos’ encounter with Lykourgos in Thrace. Dionysos seems to appear more often in comedy and satyr-play 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 humanity, the greatness of human

heroes, their sufferings and their place in the universe. Simply put, Greek tragedy, indeed much of Greek myth, does not have much to do directly with gods. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (458) and the Prometheus-plays attributed to Aeschylus are unusual in the domination of the action by gods rather than humans. In 1978 Taplin stated 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 esthetic entertainment, which in the case of tragedy was "serious" (*spoudaios*) and raised great 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 (in particular) and the god. For Vernant Dionysos was the god who crosses the boundaries and confuses reality and illusion, who makes us lose in his collective 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 *mimesis* (representation), a world presided over by the mask behind which individual identity is hidden. Simon Goldhill among many other modern critics 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? Richard Seaford, on the other hand, regarded Dionysos as essentially a democratic god, one who removes the barriers between city and country, between rich and poor, between privileged and 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 side of the ledger we must reiterate that the plays as we have them have little to do with Dionysos. Scott 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. He 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 elsewhere restricted to the worship of Dionysos. The plays were part of the cult of Dionysos at Athens, but is the connection an intrinsic one? Masks are not restricted 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 put them up on the temple, not wear them. If we accept the etymology of tragedy ("goat-song") as "song at the goat," that is, accompanying the sacrifice of a goat, the goat is not in itself a Dionysiac creature. Goats were sacrificed to Apollo, the Muses, Pan, and Artemis. To put the matter another way: 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

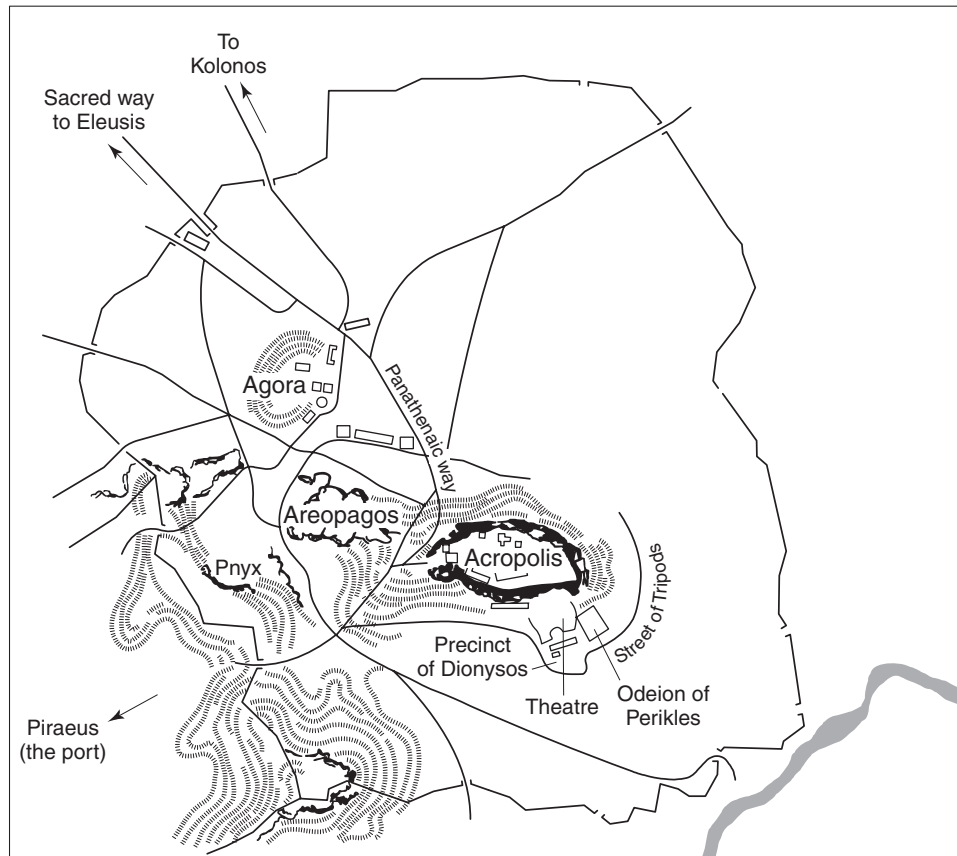


Figure 1.6 *Map of Athens at the end of the classical period*

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 some 15,000 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 esthetic 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 may have been the formal setting, but is it a case of cause and effect? Scullion (2002) suggests plausibly that the theater was located near the temple of Dionysos by accident, 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 reestablished in ca. 500 or after the Persian invasion and leveling of the city (480), officials wanted to develop that part of the city, on the other side from the *agora*. In the 440s Perikles has the *odeion* erected beside the theater, in fact jostling into it. The main entry to the theater from the *agora* was around the north and east slopes of the Acropolis, along the Street of the Tripods, the tripods being the monuments erected by victorious dramatic *choregoi*. 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, one hundred years or so into the history of tragedy, perhaps one went to the theater to be entertained, to be part of the group experience, yes, but not one that had much of the formally religious about it.

One thing we can be sure of, that Greek drama was not a presentation or enactment of ritual. The school of 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 told to explain the details of that ritual. Beneath the form of a Greek tragedy Murray detected a supposed pattern of ritual, the rites of spring for the "spirit of the year," a cycle of death and rebirth, 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. For comedy, Cornford* replaced the death in tragedy with ritual combat and a sacred marriage with overtones of fertility, 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 Peithetairos with Princess in *Birds*), that does not turn Aristophanes' extraordinarily witty and sophisticated comedies into a fertility union. There are too many variations in the plot, characters, and tone of Greek tragedy for it to have come from ritual. By its very nature ritual is performed in the same way again and again. What matters for tragedy in particular is the variation from the pattern, not the pattern itself.

Drama may certainly use ritual, however, and more recent criticism has concentrated on how various rituals, familiar to and taken for granted by the audience, may impinge upon the drama and contribute to our understanding of them. 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, or on a grander scale the worship of Dionysos himself (*Bacchae*) or the fact that the Furies will be established beneath the Acropolis as Eumenides ("kind ones"). The dramatic impact gains when the reader comes to understand what the ancient spectator knew

* F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (Cambridge 1914).

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 perhaps together in the last strophe. This is a play very much about love and the relations between male and female, and this song may well relate to the ritual songs by men and women at weddings, ironic in that Hippolytos wants no part in Love, even more ironically so in that Hippolytos will be honored by brides on their wedding eve. Antigone sees her fate of being walled up in a tomb as a sort of 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 forms, 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 *ephebeia*, would have illuminated the humor of that play. In passing, one should note that the ritual of the 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. If tragedy did develop from the choral songs accompanying his rituals, it may have been the case that there were not all that many myths about Dionysos that could become good drama. Early Greek myth was an incredibly fertile source of stories, of all kinds about all sorts of heroes. Homer had made the Greek war against Troy part of the common heritage of Greece; other song-cycles had arisen over 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 would have perhaps 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 Ikaros, both of whom encountered Dionysos with appropriately “tragic” results.

Dionysos appears more often in satyr-play 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”). If satyr-play was introduced into the festival for the sake of a Dionysiac association, it is not surprising that this god would appear in satyr-drama. He appeared in Aeschylus’ *Spectators*, berating his satyrs for abandoning his *choros* for the life of an athlete:

*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 was responsible for the return of Hephaistos to Olympos. Again the sensual delights of Dionysos are presented to Hephaistos:

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

But it is in comedy that Dionysos appears most often, and he does so, in Alan Sommerstein's phrase (1996: 11), in the role of "Dionysos as anti-hero." Comedy felt free to laugh at and 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 live up to his situation. Two slaves in *Frogs* 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 the nice 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 Paris 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 navy and is taught the arts of war by the Athenian admiral Phormion. The fragments show us the effete and ineffectual Dionysos trying to adapt to the rigors of army life. And, of course, 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. In Aeschylus' *Edonians* Lykourgos is puzzled by this figure which appears to be both male and female. One of the boundaries that Dionysos dissolves is that of gender. 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 him for a "she" and threatens to sell "her" as soon as possible. In *Dionysalexandros* he appears as Paris, either in the guise of a Trojan prince or more likely as a rustic shepherd, and we are told that the chorus of satyrs laugh and jeer at him. In *Frogs* (38–46) 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 his slave calls him first "Herakles" – "don't call me that or use that name" – and then "Dionysos" – "that's even worse." Disguising Dionysos and then penetrating that disguise was part of his role in drama.

Drama then does have a religious dimension. Its origins are traditionally assigned to the formal worship of the god Dionysos. Plays were produced as part of the festivals in honor of Dionysos, when the normal life of the city stopped and the life 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 appear on stage, intervene and influence the action, interact (often violently) with the human characters, but what interests the playwrights (particularly Euripides) is the human reaction. What do humans believe and expect from their gods, how do these gods live up to human expectations, can one really imagine a divine force or entity behaving 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 of an ambiguous and discomfiting deity was not a bad place to attempt to explore the meaning of life.

The Theatrical Space

Almost anyone with a smattering of knowledge about ancient drama will know the theater at Epidauros (figure 1.7). Set in an isolated part of the Peloponnese against a stunning natural backdrop, and about 90 percent intact, this theater invariably appears in the standard guides and handbooks of the ancient theater. 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



Figure 1.7 *Theater at Epidauros.* © *Archaeological Receipts Fund.*

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 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 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 make out the layout that playwrights, performers, and spectators had to work with in the fifth century. Today (figure 1.2) we see a round *orchestra*, 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 halfway across the *orchestra*. All of this postdates the fifth century. It was in the 320s the Athenian statesman Lykourgos rebuilt the theater in stone and added the lavish touches that we see today. The backdrop of the modern theater is the bustling and busy twenty-first century metropolis of modern Athens – 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 poets competed in the fifth century.

A “theater” was a “watching area,” 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 *orchestra* or “dancing place.” In modern theatrical usage

this term 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 assuming a rustic origin for drama used to think that this *orchestra* developed from the round threshing-floor, on which, it is suggested, country songs and dances were performed after the harvest and threshing were complete. But not all early “dancing floors” were perfectly round and drama seems to have evolved 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* (“marketplace”), the center of Athenian daily life. It was next to, but not part of, the area sacred to Dionysos, and we have discussed already the debate whether drama (especially tragedy) was in any way intrinsically Dionysian, or merely linked by an accident of geography.

Any evidence (albeit late) that we have for the Lenaia festival in late January suggests that performances on that occasion were originally held in the *agora*, where an *orchestra* and benches were located. When the production of comedy and tragedy at the Lenaia became a formally state-sponsored competition about 440, these will have been moved to the theater, although some will 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 venue different 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.

The perfectly circular *orchestra* 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. The hollow on the south-east slope of the Acropolis was not a neat semi-circle to begin with, although by the Hellenistic and Roman eras such a semi-circle had been created (figure 1.6). 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 *orchestra* by a little more than 180 degrees, the vast 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 (“Concert-hall”), 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*).” Ancient sources suggest that dramas were originally performed in the *agora* before 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 320s. At both Thorikos, a regional deme-theater in the south-east of Attica (figure 1.8), and the fifth-century theater at Argos the evidence reveals for the most part rows of front-facing seating.

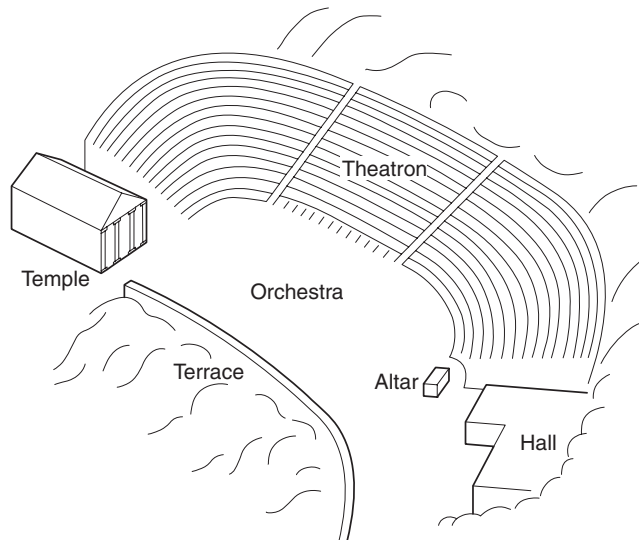


Figure 1.8 *The deme-theater at Thorikos*

Below the spectators extended the *orchestra*. Most of the Greek theaters that have survived are heavily altered by later developments, one of which was the perfectly circular *orchestra*. 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 *orchestra* some twenty-four meters across, slightly to the south and east of the present *orchestra*. Some have challenged the findings of Dörpfeld, wondering if the arc existed at all, and argue that the *orchestra* in theaters of the fifth century was more rectangular or trapezoidal than circular. Certainly the *orchestra* in the regional deme-theater of Thorikos is anything but circular. But one should remember that the original songs and dances, the dithyrambs which were still part of the Dionysia in the classical period, were in fact called the “circular choruses.” These employed choruses of fifty men or boys, and the words “circular chorus” seem to demand 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 central 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 *orchestra*. More likely this central point could be used as the focus of the 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.

The earliest theatrical space seems to have consisted of spectators on the slope of the hillside and the playing area below (the *orchestra*). Indeed the earliest three plays that we have, Aeschylus' *Persians*, *Seven*, and *Suppliants*, can be staged in only this space. There is no hint of or need for a building in the background – 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 *orchestra* near the drop to the terrace below. Actors and chorus 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. The hillside drops from the level of the theater to that of the precinct of Dionysos, and there was very likely a terrace wall on the south side of the *orchestra*, marking that boundary of the playing space.

Characters and chorus would enter the *orchestra* from either side. At Epidauros and in other later theaters these entrances (*eisodoi*) are formal structures, with a framed doorway on either side. But in the earliest theater they must have just walked into the playing-space. At *Clouds* 327 (423 or ca. 418) Aristophanes has a character point out the chorus arriving, “there by the *eisodoi*,” which should imply 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 *orchestra*. 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.

But by 458 the third element of the Athenian theater has emerged, the *skene* building at the rear of the *orchestra*. The word *skene* just means “booth” or “tent,” and here we should imagine not the pup tent familiar from camping, but a pavilion-style affair. It would have been a useful place to store properties and to allow the actors to change costumes, and may have already existed as a temporary structure. But in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* of 458 we become aware of a formal structure on the far side of the acting area, and in particular of its door and roof. Characters come and go as before by the *eisodoi* on either side of the *orchestra*, but now the door in the *skene* building provides a third entrance, which is used to great effect in *Agamemnon*. As Taplin (1978: 33) puts it well, Klytaimestra 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



Figure 1.9 *Fourth-century theater at Argos. Photo by Ian Vining.*

two plays of *Oresteia*. In two versions of “Orestes’ revenge” (*Libation-Bearers*, Sophokles’ *Elektra*) the whole plot turns entirely on how to get into the palace.

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, there was only a wooden building on the opposite side of the *orchestra*. Such a structure would have been a temporary one, for it would not be needed for the “circular choruses” of the opening day of the Dionysia, and the very term *skene* (“booth,” “tent”) suggests something non-elaborate and non-permanent. In fact the *odeion* of Perikles was said to have been modeled on the tent of the Great King, Xerxes, when he occupied Athens in 480.* At the fourth-century theater in Megalopolis we can see the remains of an alcove on the side, from which the *skene*-building was rolled into place when needed. At some point at Athens in the classical period a small stoa (colonnade) was constructed behind the *skene*-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 320s, but might be as early as 400.

At Epidauros or at the fourth-century theater at Argos (figure 1.9) one will see the remnants of the stone foundations outside the *orchestra*, but the evidence for the earlier theaters suggests that the *skene*-building lay partly within the circle of the *orchestra*.

* In Euripides *Ion* (lines 1128–66) we get a description of the formal pavilion (*skenaî*) in which Xouthos holds a celebration to introduce his newly found son.

Otherwise there could be a problem of distance from the spectators and a disjunction of the playing spaces, if the *skene* were removed completely from the *orchestra*. The presence of the *skene*-building allows for different *foci* for the action — this is 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 *orchestra*, and the second half around the central door in the *skene*. As in *Agamemnon*, control of this doorway is of essential dramatic importance. Even in a much later comedy such as *Frogs* (405), the first part of the play, the adventures of Dionysos en route to the Underworld, is played in the *orchestra*, with the action shifting to the door to Plouton's palace in the second. In both tragedy and comedy do we find formal mini-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 humorous or suspenseful results.

As the fifth-century *skene*-building was of wood, we cannot determine its appearance with any accuracy. The dramatic texts themselves are pressed into service to shed light on what the spectators saw and the performers employed. Although there may have been a tent or booth there in the earliest years of tragedy, an actual structure as part of the performance 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 labors, this year-long watch that I keep lying on top of the palace of Atreus.

Further on in the play Klytaimestra will insist that her husband enter the palace walking on a blood-red carpet, and later she will reappear to compel Cassandra to enter as well. Thus by 458 we can infer for the *skene* 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 *skene*.

Evidence from vases in the fourth century reveals that this door was in fact a pair of panels opening inward, and in several plays the door marks out 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 secure and ordered world of daily life. In *Ion* the *skene* 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 *skene* can represent a variety of physical structures: temples (that of Zeus in *Children of Herakles*, 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 (Herakles' in *Herakles* or that of his guest friend in *Trachinian Women*), a tent (as in *Hecuba* or *Ajax*), a cave (as in *Philoktetes* or *Cyclops*). Perhaps the most 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 laborer or a cow-herd" (252).

How many doors did the *skene* have? In Menander's comedy *The Grouch* (316) the speaker of the prologue, the god Pan, identifies three distinct dwellings behind three doors: his own in the middle, that of Knemon (the principal center of the action), and that of Gorgias. Clearly in the rebuilt theater of the late fourth century there were three distinct doors of roughly equal importance. But almost all tragedies of the fifth century can be played with only one door, an entrance that we have seen can attain an almost metaphysical significance. But there are instances in fifth-century comedy 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 "reflectory" of Sokrates (93):

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

This can be played with only one door, used as both Strepsiades' house and the "think-shop" of Sokrates, but some prefer a second smaller door for Strepsiades' house – the same problem will occur again at 790–815, where Sokrates reenters 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 is surely the central door of the *skene* – but Trygaios has his own house to which he returns at line 800. In a fragment of a comedy (420) by Eupolis we hear that "the 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 allowed for and did in fact use three doors, why does none of the tragedies that we possess seem to employ these side doors? 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 *skene* 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 doors than one could be used. In *Trojan Women*, for instance, the unallotted captives are described as confined "in these buildings," and "with them Helen." A single 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 from a different door.

Sophokles is said by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449a18) to have developed *skenographia* ("painting of the *skene*"). Since the settings would change from play to play within a particular production, this term should suggest something like portable panels that could be changed as the setting changed from palace to temple to cave to house.

Certain comic texts suggest strongly that the *skene*-building had windows, at which characters could be seen and interact with those in the *orchestra*. At *Wasps* 317–32 the imprisoned Philokleon sings a song of lament “through the opening” to the chorus of elderly jurors gathered below. In *Lysistrata* the semi-chorus of women have barricaded themselves in the acropolis (i.e., the *skene*-building) against the assault of the semi-chorus of old men. At lines 352–462 the two choruses engage in a comic confrontation, culminating at line 420 with the women pouring jugs of water and chamber pots over the old men. This could be done with both choruses on the level out in the open, but it would gain dramatically if the women were above emptying their pots onto the men below. The roof would be good for this purpose but also the windows would do equally well. Finally, 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.

One of the more hotly debated matters is whether a low platform or “stage” lay between the *orchestra* and the *skene*-building. Modern productions at the theater of Epidaurus routinely employ such a raised platform, with wide steps leading up from the *orchestra* to the *skene* itself. In both tragedy and comedy we may detect an increasing role for the actor at the expense of the chorus, and in the fourth century actors become “stars” in the sense that we understand them. A raised platform, it is argued, reflects that increased 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 *skene* would hardly have served actors in a theater where the great majority sat above and looked down. We are too used to looking up at a raised playing area, but at Athens most of the spectators looked down to the *orchestra*. Nor do the dramas of the fifth century reveal a marked distinction between actors and chorus; in fact they interacted as much as they were separated. In *Agamemnon* the chorus approach the *skene*-door when they hear the death-cries from within; in *Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Kolonos* the chorus surround a figure taking refuge at the center of the *orchestra*. In *Eumenides* and *Trojan Women* the chorus enter from the *skene*-building, rather than from the side. In *Frogs* Dionysos can race across the *orchestra* to appeal to his priest in the front row for protection from the monsters.

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 *orchestra* (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.

It is argued that this means to rise from the *orchestra* to a raised playing area, and on vases of the fourth century comic scenes are shown with steps leading up to what is clearly a stage, beyond which there is the double door of the *skene*. If there was a separate raised playing-area at the rear of the *orchestra* and before the *skene*, 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

work equally well as “come up onto this platform where we are” or just “come forward to the central point 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 *orchestra* to the central door of the *skene*. An actor in the front half of the *orchestra* 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 *skene* was called the *theologeion* (“god-speaking”), 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 humble watchman at the start of *Agamemnon*, and other scenes show 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)*

In this scene at least four people are gathered on the roof, which tells us something about the size of the *skene*-building in 408. We should not assume automatically that 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 *skene*:

Chorus: *Look. Do you feel the same pulse of fear, seeing such an apparition above the house? (Herakles 816–7)*

Obviously, then, the roof was accessible from the rear by a ladder or wooden stairs, but since so 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 Athenian theater may have possessed two other features that would have affected production. Elsewhere we know of something called the “steps of Charon,” which allowed an actor to pass underground beneath the *orchestra* and appear in the crucial central position. These may be seen at the Hellenistic theater at Eretria and would have been perfect for the appearance of the ghost of Dareios in *Persians* or that of Klytaimestra in *Eumenides*, but there is no evidence for their existence at Athens in either the fifth or fourth century.

Then there is “Hammond’s Rock.” In the 1970s N. G. L. Hammond called attention to a rocky outcrop on the east side of the *orchestra*, about five meters square. As this would have been partly inside the *orchestra*, it was assumed that this had been removed early in the fifth century when the *orchestra* was created. Hammond’s thesis was that this outcrop still existed in the time of Aeschylus and was used in the staging

of his dramas, for the tomb of Dareios in *Persians* or the rock to which Prometheus was chained, and even the human jurors in *Eumenides* – these representing the Council of the Areopagos (“Ares’ Hill” or “Crag”). But the evidence for its presence is shaky at best, and such a feature would have provided a lop-sided playing space and blocked the view of spectators on that side of the *theatron*.

The ancient theater was not suited for or given to what we would call “special effects” or the creation of reality in its productions. But there were two devices, attested for the fifth century, whose use can be documented in the existing plays. First there was what is commonly called the *ekkyklema* (“roll out,” “wheel out” – *kyklos* = “wheel”), although that term is not found until very late sources. When comedy refers to such a scene, it is the verb *ekkyklein* that is normally found. This was some sort of wheeled device that could be rolled through the double doors in the *skene*, on which could be represented interior scenes *en tableau*. An 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 *skene*-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 *ekkyklema* was announced and that the spectators would put themselves in the proper frame of mind to accept this fairly blatant stage convention. Modern critics suggest all sorts of scenes that could have been staged with the *ekkyklema*, 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 in this respect. Two display-scenes occur in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1372) and *Libation-Bearers* (973), where first Klytimestra and then Orestes stands over the bodies of their victims. Here it is often assumed that these tableaux were staged by the *ekkyklema*, while in *Eumenides*, the third play of this trilogy of 458, it has been suggested that some or all of the chorus of sleeping Furies enter through the *skene*-door on the *ekkyklema*. This would mean that the *ekkyklema* would have been part of the *skene*-building from the start, since the *skene*-building itself seems to have been added around 460. Some doubt that the *ekkyklema* existed so early and observe that we get no advance warning of an interior scene as we do in the examples cited above. Perhaps announcing the use of

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

Comedy made great fun out of the *ekkyklema*. Tragedy required the spectators to suspend their disbelief and enter willingly the dramatic illusion, especially when a potentially noisy device such as the *ekkyklema* was employed. Comedy, on the other hand, reveled in disrupting the dramatic illusion, and would call attention to the technique which, in tragedy, would be part of the accepted illusion. Thus in *Acharnians* and *Women at the Thesmophoria* a tragic poet will be “rolled out” on the *ekkyklema* 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 *ekkyklema* 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 *mechane* (“machine”), also known as the *geranos* (“crane”) or *krade* (“branch”). This was a device firmly anchored behind the *skene*-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. It is this device that has given birth to the much-used phrase *deus ex machina* (“god from the machine”). A variety of suggestions has been offered to explain how the *mechane* worked. One ancient source talks of raising the *mechane* like a finger, and from the comic evidence (*Peace*, *Birds*) it is clear that a character could be raised from behind the *skene* to land in front. Thus the *mechane* could both raise and swivel. To modern eyes such a device with its visible cables and creaking machinery might seem hostile to the ethos of tragedy, but, as with the entire nature of Greek tragedy, spectators were willing to participate by suspending belief, and those who enjoyed spectacle would eagerly await such a dramatic end to the play.

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

How large a load could the *mechane* bear? Usually one person only appears, and in cases where two deities appear (Poseidon and Athene in *Trojan Women*, Iris and Madness in *Herakles*), an equally good case can be made for their epiphany on the

roof. But in *Orestes* (see below) Apollo and Helen certainly appeared on the *mechane*, and the two Dioskouroi were swung onto the *skene*-roof in Euripides' *Elektra*. The certain uses of the *mechane* for Pegasos, 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 *mechane* seems to have been a later development. Its first certain use is in Euripides' *Medea* (431). It was used principally at the close of dramas, often for the appearance of a deity to resolve or pronounce upon the action down below. But humans could and did appear on the *mechane* – 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 *skene*-roof or on the *mechane*. The presence of a chariot or the associations of motion should suggest an appearance on the *mechane*. Thus at *Andromache* 1225–30:

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 plausibly conclude that Thetis enters on the *mechane* and lands on the roof. So too the Dioskouroi at *Elektra* 1230 move toward and light upon the palace. At times the deity might appear either on the *mechane* or upon the roof, for example those of Athene at the end of *Ion*, *IT*, and *Suppliant Women*, and the arrival of the Dioskouroi in *Helen*. Perhaps when no attention is called to the arrival, we might infer an appearance on the roof rather than on the *mechane*.

One extraordinary scene in tragedy from the very late career of Euripides demonstrates 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 (*orchestra*), Menelaos and his followers hammering at the door of the *skene*-building, Orestes and others on the roof, and then on the *mechane* 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 carried the greater prestige, and the one about which we are best informed. The Dionysia was a five-day holiday that was both religious (ostensibly in honor of 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 we 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 worshipers of Dionysos

(a god honored by wine and a general sense of release), members of the male citizen-body of Athens (there were also metics, foreign visitors, boys, and probably slaves and women – see below), 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 at one point speaks of dramas performed before 30,000 spectators, but even the largest of the ancient theaters (those at Megalopolis, Syracuse, and Ephesos) do not seem to have held much more than 20,000. But even 12,000–15,000 spectators is an audience on a large scale, and the modern counterpart to the ancient theater is not the enclosed interior box with 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, which wound its way from *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 Roman periods the *theatron* was divided by vertical aisles and at least one horizontal walkway (*diazoma*), creating the nice regular wedges of seating (*kerkides*) that are the hallmark of the ancient theater. But in the fifth century, spectators sat in benches on the hills and the arrangements must have been far less formal. We know from a passage in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405) that the priest of Dionysos sat in a prominent location and that the character Dionysos was able to approach him and beg his protection. In the theater as we see it, the front row is marked by a series of elaborately carved stone thrones, inscribed with "(seat of the priest of . . .)"

The audience was essentially composed of citizen males – comedy regularly addresses the spectators as *andres* ("men"), and on a couple of occasions the spectators are subdivided 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* (fr. 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.

Some passages from Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425) shed light on 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 iden-

tified as his *Babylonians*) Aristophanes had “said bad things about the city of Athens in the presence of foreigners (*xenoi*).” But now at *Acharnians* 504–6:

the contest is that at the Lenaia, and foreigners (xenoi) are not yet present – here we are then, 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 *choregoi* 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 debated constantly but with no accepted conclusion. It is true that ancient Athens was a male-dominated society – only males could vote in the *ekklesia* and hold political office within the state – and much of the evidence (principally, however, from upper-class sources) suggests that women lived in a sort of seclusion like that 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.

If then the dramatic competitions were part of a religious festival (that of Dionysos), 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 admittedly in the fourth century after the heyday of the fifth century, talks of tragedy as “a kind of rhetoric addressed to boys, women and men, slaves and free citizens without distinction” (*Gorgias* 502d), and imagines in his ideal state that “people will not be eager to allow tragic poets to put their stages in the marketplace and perform before women and children and the public at large” (*Laws* 817c). Elsewhere he argues that older children prefer comedy, while adult males and women of culture would choose tragedy (*Laws* 658d). These passages suggest that in Plato’s time women were a natural and substantial part of the audience. On the other hand, the comic passages mentioned above address only the males. If women were present in the fifth century, either they were present only in small numbers or, in Henderson’s phrase, “the audience was notionally male.”

Other evidence comes from comedy and 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 should imply 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 (krithe).*
 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 *krithe* (“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 (krithe).*
 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 *krithe* and is not necessarily solid evidence for the presence of women in the theater.

There is some evidence that the spectators were given treats during the play – see 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 *choregos*. 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).

We know from the orators that the Athenian court-room was a noisy and contentious group atmosphere, and we can imagine that the Athenian theater was much the same. There is evidence from the fourth century of spectators hissing and clucking at unpopular actors or poor performances, perhaps even of hurling food to express discontent, and applauding wildly when pleased. One anecdote records that a controversial line from Euripides’ lost *Aiolos* had 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 do know of a theatrical security force, called the *rhabdouchoi* (“theater police,” literally “rod-bearers”) whose duties seem to have included keeping order in the *theatron*.

By the middle of the fourth century the Athenians had established the “Theoric Fund” (clearly related to the *thea-* root, “spectate”) 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. It is this, it is suggested, that explains the right-wing bias of Old Comedy – they were performing for the elite and not for a representative general public. There was some reserved seating (*proedria*): for public officials such as the *Boule* (the council of 400 Athenians; at *Peace* 887, 905–6 and *Birds* 794 specific reference is made to separate seating for the members of the *Boule*), the archons, the ten generals, and the *nomophylakes* (“guardians of the laws”), for those being specially honored, and the *epheboi* (young men doing their military service).

Conventions of the space

First, it was a large space. David Wiles estimates that from the central door in the *skene* 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. For a spectator seated in the last row the performers down below would seem only a few inches high. Thus there could not be a vast horde of players and the actors would need to be dressed distinctively to make them and their roles stand out.

The theater was also a large communal space. There were at least ten thousand spectators crowded into a restricted space, either on benches or on the later marble rows. The experience of attending the Greek theater was not one 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 (2002: 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



Figure 1.10 *Theater at Delphi. Photo by I. C. Storey.*

shared the same broad response, the power of emotion generated would have been quite unlike that created today in a studio theatre. 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 play of its group). One would be aware of both the natural surrounding, 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. Modern outdoor stadia are usually built to direct the spectators' view inward toward the playing area and do not distract with a view of the natural setting (the baseball field at San Francisco is an exception), but in the Greek theater *theatron* and natural setting 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 seems 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 *skene*. 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, for instance, 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 even from before its first words. For the Dionysia there was the Proagon (“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 the 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 in *Antigone* Kreon’s entry at line 162 is prefaced by a notice by the chorus, “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 that they see 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 completely out of the blue at line 476, but his traditional accoutrements of lion-skin and club will make his identity clear – at line 478 the chorus make it abundantly clear, “Admetos is indeed at home, Herakles.”

By the time of fourth-century comedy, the *eisodoi* had acquired distinct identities, the one to the spectators’ right leading to a local venue, that to the left a foreign setting. Combined with the entrance via the *skene*, these would allow for some creative staging on the part of the poet, for what has been called “misdirection.” The spectators would be expecting an entry from one position and would be surprised either by a character entering via a different entry or by an unexpected development. One of the most interesting such moments 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 perform the second *stasimon* (863–910) and Jokaste reappears through the *skene*-door to make an offering at the statue of Apollo (911–22). Character, and 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.

Similarly, 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 *skene*-door, in *Eumenides* (perhaps on the *ekkyklema*) and in *Trojan Women*, where the *skene* represents the tents in which the captive women are being held. Choral identities in tragedy are not that unusual, for example elders of the state, handmaidens, townsfolk, and thus their identity is not always specifically announced. But 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 worshipers 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 analog 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 *kordax*, and at the end of *Wasps* the main character engages in a vigorous contest with three other stage-dancers. 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 picture 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 so much of the effect was created by the emotive spectacle of the dance.

We often regard the chorus as operating on the sidelines of the action, commenting (occasionally with banality) on the exchange between the actors, but they can have a more significant role. Indeed in one or two plays they are a principal character and it is their fate on which the action depends, as in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*. They take part in the episodes with the actors, sometimes as a major agent, more often commenting on the action, 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.

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.*

In *Libation-Bearers* the chorus, again unusually, intervene in the action to prevent Aigisthos from bringing his bodyguards with him (770–3). 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 (*agon*) and their sympathy and attitude change.

When the chorus take part in an episode, they use the normal Attic (Athenian) dialect and their speech is no different from that of the actors. Also when they process into the *orchestra*, often to the accompaniment of the anapestic meter (⊔ ⊔ –), 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 dialog between the dying Alkestis and her distraught husband in which she sings in Doric lyrics and he responds in less emotive iambs, Alkestis begins: *Halie kai phaos hameras ouraniai te dinai nephalas dromaiou* (“Sun and light of day and sky-swirls of racing cloud”), which in Attic should have run *Helie kai phos hemeras ouraniai te dinai nephales 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 are less prone to singing in this artificial Doric, and when they do (as *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; at the Lenaia metics could participate for that festival only. Those serving in a chorus were spared military service during the period of rehearsal. We would like to know how large was the body of performers available – a performance 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 1,100 performers, although one might consider the possibility that a dithyrambic performer might also appear in a dramatic chorus. 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

any Welshman, it seems, can sing – then spectators would be familiar with the experience and technique and perhaps be more drawn into the details of performance.

The chorus of tragedy was originally twelve – this is made clear by a passage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1348–71) where the chorus disintegrates into twelve distinct individuals – and was increased to fifteen by Sophokles. Choristers would have to perform in the three separate tragedies as well as take the roles of satyrs in the satyr-drama that concluded the production. Acting as a tragic chorister, then, would be a major undertaking and presumably carried more than a little prestige. A chorus of fifteen would allow for three files of five, and there is evidence that the outside file in their entry, that closest to the spectators, was regarded as the most important, with its leader considered the chorus-leader. How the chorus performed in their standing-songs (*stasima*) is a matter of debate. One possibility is that they performed in three ranks facing out into the *theatron*, which would suit production in theaters without the circular *orchestra*. Another is that they danced in a ring around the *orchestra*, much in the manner that Greeks dance in the round today. Supporting this interpretation is the nomenclature of the parts of a choral song: *strophe* and *antistrophe*, “turn” and “counter-turn.” Yet another possibility is a triangle of five ranks (5–4–3–2–1), with the chorus-leader at the point. Perhaps an originally circular style of performance was augmented or superseded by other formations, when the number was increased to fifteen.

Comedy had a larger chorus, composed of twenty-four choristers, and would need to operate with twice the space and manpower, probably producing a more crowded and less elegant spectacle. It is possible that a comic chorus might enter from both *eisodoi* – this would make good sense in *Peace* with its Panhellenic chorus and *Birds* with its swarm of winged creatures – but on the three occasions where comedy mentions the *eisodoi* (*Clouds* 326, *Birds* 296, Aristophanes fr. 403) the reference is in the singular (“entrance”). All three passages refer to the entry of the chorus. Either the chorus did enter through one *eisodos* only or attention is drawn to only one entrance, even though both were in use. 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 the latter we know that the chorus divided and came together again as the play progressed.

Actors were assigned in some way to the productions, perhaps by lot, perhaps by the choice of the *choregos* or the poet. It would be revealing to know how much choice the poet had in his actors. The 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 comic poet and his chief character merge at least twice – and we would suggest also *Wasps* where Bdelykleon seems to speak for Aristophanes at lines 650–1.

There were three speaking actors in classical tragedy – some of the early plays by Aeschylus can be performed with two – and 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 movement from one exit to a different entrance. There are a couple of places in Aristophanes where four speaking actors



Figure 1.11 *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 Pierce Fund. Photo © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

seem certainly 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-play, we do not have many visual representations of a tragic performer (see figure 1.11), but the tragic actors who appear on the Pronomos Vase (figure 3.1) and the *Choregoi* Vase (figure 4.2) are costumed with grandeur and a more than common splendor. The masks were life-like, the costumes rich and flowing. The effect was to reinforce the "serious" nature of the genre. Many of the vases that are clearly influenced by tragedy do not show masked or costumed actors – they give us a tragic scene with the conventional dress (or lack of it) of Greek art. In the satyr-play, while the satyrs (figure 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 (*geloion*), and its actors wore grotesque masks, padded costumes, and a dangling *phallos*.

Prizes were awarded for the first actor, first in tragedy and later in comedy. By the fourth century lead actors had become international celebrities, “stars” as we understand the term, and at the Dionysia ca. 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; the most striking are in *Trachinian Women*, where the lead actor will play first the whimpering 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 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 play, while the actor playing the masculine Klytaimestra will become Athene (“I am always for the male”).

Both tragedy and comedy could use other players, *kopha prosopa* (“silent faces”), in all sorts of supporting roles: guards, attendants, kitchen utensils (in *Wasps*), children. There are instances of 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*. Sometimes the extra individual characters might seem actually to speak, but it is more likely that their brief lines were spoken by one of the three canonical actors, who after all were masked and would not be seen to speak – 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 *skene*-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.*

In the judgment scene of Kratinos’ lost *Dionysalexandros* there could be as many as five speaking characters (Dionysos-Alexandros, Hermes, and three goddesses). We could have had three separate scenes as each goddess appeared to make her appeal to the judge, but all other ancient allusions to the Judgment of Paris shows the three goddesses together. Clearly the easiest way to stage this scene is to have Hermes speak for each goddess in turn.



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 (97.172).*

Accompanying the chorus was an *auletes*, often referred to inaccurately as a “flute-player,” as an *aulos* was a reed instrument, played by blowing into it, rather than across the mouthpiece. Visual representations of the *auletes* show him to be 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 *auletes* wore splendid robes with elaborate decoration – witness the figure of Pronomos, who occupies the prime position on the Pronomos-Vase (figure 3.1), more so than the poet himself who sits apart in a less prominent place, or the splendid striding figure on a red-figure *krater* in Sydney (figure 1.12). The *auletes* would accompany the choral sections of tragedy, comedy, and satyr-play and would provide the music for the dithyrambic choruses, leading them into the performance space. At *Birds* 859–61 it appears that the *aulos*-player in that comedy was himself 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* which 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 essential to the sense of formal performance in ancient Athens and in fact symbolic of it. It has been suggested that the formal dress of the *aulos*-player indicates that this normally disreputable character is on his best behavior when performing on a civic occasion. The modern equivalent of the *aulos* might be the guitar, since 1950 the universal symbol of popular counter-culture, but also no stranger to a classical music concert.

There are occasions where the spectators themselves become actors 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 *agon* 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. Inf. Arg: And what do you see?*

Sup. Arg.: *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*."

But there are occasions in tragedy where the spectators are brought into the drama. One of the most striking is the opening scene of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, where a priest appeals to Oedipus on behalf of his plague-struck people. It is sometimes thought that these "children of Kadmos" were either the chorus who had entered with the priest at the start of the play or a subsidiary chorus who departed at the end of the prologue. But suppose that these "pitiful children" were the Athenian spectators who are brought into the drama by the wave of Oedipus' hand. 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 *orchestra* 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. Aeschylus surely could not 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 and success of *Eumenides* lies in the resonance created as the dramatic action approached Athens of the dramatist’s own day.

Drama and the *Polis*

While a festival honoring a god might strike us as wholly religious in orientation, participation in religious festivals was an essential part of civic life in every Greek community. Since all religious festivals were at least in part directed toward the protection and prosperity of their participants, when those festivals were community-wide, they all might be said to serve political ends in the broadest sense of that term, that is, to be of benefit to the *polis*. On this most basic of levels, then, 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*.

“*Polis*,” of course, is the Greek term from which we derive our terms “politics” and “political,” but it remains notoriously difficult to convey the depth and complexity of its associations in a single English term. Most frequently translated “city-state,” in Greek sources *polis* serves to identify both a town as administrative center of a territory and the territory itself. Thus Athens, an *astu* (town), is also a *polis* in so far as it serves as the administrative center of the territory of Attica, while the territory of Attica, with all its smaller towns and communities, forms the *polis* named for Athens when viewed as a collective entity. But more than this, *polis* also embraced the people resident in its territory, and in the case of Athens/Attica, whether they lived in the city proper or dwelt in an outlying community, these people bore the name Athenians, if they qualified for citizenship. The Greek term for “citizen” was *polites*, and signified one who possessed certain rights in a *polis*. Thus when someone claimed to be an Athenian citizen, he was not making claim to a particular nationality, nor was he necessarily revealing the town of his residence; rather he was identifying himself with a particular collective, a *polis*, in which according to its *politeia* (constitution) he was entitled to certain benefits and obligated to fulfill certain responsibilities in and to the larger community. Different constitutions set different qualifications and restrictions on who could claim citizenship and on what their rights and duties might be, but generally these rights and duties were loosely framed around four activities – defense (military service), policy-making (voting), administration (holding office) and resource management (owning land).

To consider drama in relation to the *polis* of Athens is inevitably to raise the question of drama’s relationship to *ta politika* (“the affairs of the *polis*”), its politics, its laws, and its political identity. 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 *polites*? 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 as we will see, drama can speak to its spectators on several levels simultaneously. But to address the issues raised by these questions requires that we 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.

Drama's political context

Aristotle defined drama as the *mimesis* of “people in action,” wherein an actor makes us believe that he is someone other than himself, the desire to represent the words, vocal inflections, posture and gestures, first, of someone known to us, and later, of some imagined or imaginary figure. As a form of behavior, “dramatization” may itself be very old. But as an art-form, it certainly does seem to have its beginning at Athens in the sixth century with the establishment by the tyrants of a new festival in honor of Dionysos (the City Dionysia). Because of its pride-of-place as the first dramatic competition formally acknowledged as such in the city, it is with this festival that our study of drama's contextual relationship to the Athenian *polis* begins.

Whether the festival was in fact established by Peisistratos in the 530s or, as is sometimes maintained, in the aftermath of the Kleisthenic reforms ca. 501, we can say that the City Dionysia came into being as an act of political will, that is, by and through the sanction of Athens' political leader(s). Just as today when a government institutes a new statutory holiday, the establishment of a new festival would serve 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.

Drama's “political” connections are further seen in the nature of the figure who would govern its annual production. When the festival was established, the official given the responsibility of its planning and execution was not the *archon basileus*, a man traditionally in charge of the religious celebrations in the city, but rather the *archon eponymous*. He was the magistrate after whom the year was named (“in the archonship of . . .”) and was selected from among the 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 magistrate in charge of matters dealing with *civic* issues clearly locates the festival in a political context.

It may also seem that the initial 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. As we shall see, the ability to travel by sea at this time of year was used to even greater political effect on the opening day of the festival in the years after the defeat of the Persians with the transfer of the Delian League’s treasury from Delos to Athens in the mid-450s.

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 toward the end of the sixth century, the City Dionysia was reorganized so that the tragic playwrights were now required to produce three tragedies *and* a satyr play, apparently (according to one source) because by that time the dramas produced at the festival had “nothing to do with Dionysos.” This might reflect a political concern based in religious belief: if the god were not being properly honored at his own festival, this could have serious negative repercussions for the well-being of the *polis*. Athens may have been seen as particularly vulnerable at this momentous time in its history when the city had just recently overthrown the tyranny and taken its next tentative steps along the road to a democratic government. At the same time, the introduction of a new dramatic genre to the City Dionysia, and one that self-consciously made humorous the traditional values and stories of old, just as Athens was permitting more of its citizen-male populace to participate actively in its political institutions suggests that the festival’s reorganization was also undertaken to reflect the new political freedoms enjoyed by the *polis*. So we have protection of the city from one perspective, and celebration of the city from the other, both serving the interests of the *polis* through its control of the medium of drama.

More clearly reflective of “political things” are the mechanics behind the organization of the festival and the events which are noted as taking place in the opening days of the competition. Here is where the idea of “context” of performance most comes into play, for the figures involved and the type of events enacted have far more in common with the city’s public face and political interests than with anything we would recognize as “religious.”

The festival as we know it from the fifth century was much akin to one of our modern statutory holidays. As we have seen, all legal and administrative business in the city ceased in accordance to law – 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 attend the festival. By the fourth century a “theoric” fund had been established to pay the cost of attendance for those who could not afford the expense. The “political” context is furthered by the fact that the funding of the festival was jointly undertaken by the city treasury and some of her wealthiest citizens. While the city bore the expenses for the sacrifices on 8th and 9th of Elaphebolion, each playwright “granted a chorus” by the archon was assigned to a *choregos*, a prosperous citizen who was responsible for the expenses involved in bringing the playwright’s dramas to public performance. Such an expenditure on the part of the well-to-do citizen was consid-

ered 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. For his expense, but only if his playwright won the contest, he would be permitted to erect a monument to his victory within the city of Athens along the road which led into the theater. 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.

One such position of leadership that a man of wealth might seek to obtain was that of general (*strategos*), a position which in the 480s became an elective office and replaced that of the archons in political power and prestige. Athens maintained ten such figures who were annually elected from a list of such eligible citizens. A story by Plutarch (*Kimón* 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 for each of the ten tribes into which Kleisthenes had divided the people of Attica/Athens at the time of his reforms. The generals too were elected according to the same distribution, one from each tribe, so this last-minute change in the usual procedures did not adversely affect the equality of representation among the tribal groups.

This account belongs to the late first century AD and to some may seem a romantic anecdote, but if true, two things are telling in regards to the political context of this dramatic competition. The first is the fact that the archon retained the power to change the standard procedure at will and apparently while the festival was in progress. Our source 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 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 speech 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 to preserve them. It also demonstrated to the visitors that they were 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 seek to impose their rule upon it.

In the latter half of the fifth century, three other notable events were played out before the assembled mass of citizens and visitors before any competitions took place. First, the levies that Athens had collected for the support of the Delian League were

paraded into the theater, talent by talent. While this accumulated wealth was ostensibly to be held in trust and reserved against the possibility of a renewed Persian attack, it was not long before Athens came to view these funds as tribute (*phoros*) and to use them in building projects for the aggrandizement of the city. This display of the yearly monies newly arrived in the city was intended to remind citizen and visitor alike of Athens' military prowess and glory as the *polis* most responsible for the defeat of the last Persian invasion, a point of pride for the city, and justification for its leadership of the Delian League (also known as the *arche*, "empire"). 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. Then came the parading of the young men in full military panoply (provided by the city), whose fathers had died while on military service and who had subsequently been raised to maturity at civic expense. These war orphans were used to send 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."

According to this overview it would be correct to say that much of what transpired at the pre-play ceremonies of 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 initially 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* has styled itself as the liberator of Greece from foreign oppression. Seen from this viewpoint, the context of drama at the City Dionysia is thus highly politicized.

To this point our attention has been focused on City Dionysia, primarily because it was the first and great 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 skits and perhaps even longer "scripted" comedies had been a part of this festival from its earliest times. Certainly "jokes from the wagons," insults directed by the performers at the spectators, are recorded as being part of the early celebration of the Lenaia. Being able to laugh at oneself and at others with others is a liberating and unifying experience. If the expectation of the festival was that people were free to "insult" other people, even when

some serious issues lay beneath the comments made, they did not need to be taken seriously, because of the context of the festival. Thus, having an event at which the city's residents were permitted to express their dissatisfaction in the form of insults actually worked to ensure the relative stability of the city. 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. 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 reaffirm 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.

Notably, even after it was made a competitive venue, the Lenaia remained a festival closed to outsiders. Things said and done at this contest were apparently only for the eyes and ears of residents of the town of Athens, but this may be due to the season when few visitors would have been able to travel by sea. It differed markedly from the City Dionysia in that metics (resident aliens, i.e., non-citizens with limited rights and obligations in the city) were allowed to participate fully both as performers and as *choregoi*. Granting this right seems to have satisfied two needs of importance to the *polis*. First, 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):

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

Second, 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 only available 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 draw the following conclusions. 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, early in the fifth century, if not before, was used to showcase its 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

This brings us then to a consideration of the relationship of drama's content to the *polis*. The evidence can be assessed along two somewhat different lines: the degree to which the dramas are reflective of the political (and social) institutions of the *polis*; and the degree to which tragedy and comedy engage with current political issues. Again, these matters are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

To begin with the first issue, we can state that many of the structural aspects of tragic and comic drama would seem to owe their form to preexisting institutions of the *polis* – its law courts, assemblies, and councils. In its law courts, prosecution and defense were more akin to competitors in a contest (*agon*), who must 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. In all these institutions, determining the right or “just” course of action, the right outcome in a matter, was their aim and the procedure was akin to a contest.

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 also 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. It is not surprising, then, that when the idea of dramatic enactment came into being, it was with one man standing forth from a group and addressing himself to them.

The extant dramatic texts, both tragic and comic, reveal their indebtedness to these political institutions in the way they employ argument and counter-argument, leading to a decision to move their plots forward. The Athenian audience, familiar with this sequence of events through their participation in the 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 the audience to reevaluate the “rightness” of the course of action taken, turning tragic drama into a type of teaching tool for the hazards of ill-informed, emotional, and short-sighted decision-making and comic drama into a farcical lesson in political incorrectness.

By employing the same form of debate as would be heard in the venerable political institutions of the city, drama puts the city's decision-making processes on display. But there were other institutions that also served as a frame of reference for the content of drama, politicized social institutions governing marriage and inheritance, interstate relationships and treaties, the guest–host obligations of *xenia*, among others, 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.” It is here that the merit of these long-standing socio-political institutions becomes the subject of debate in the dramas and we slide from political institutions in drama to a discussion of political issues in dramatic content.

For comedy there can be little argument that its content is political. Not curtailed by known myths, story-lines, and characters, comic drama was free to present a humorous look at issues of topical 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 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 be a good citizen. For instance, a politician named Kleonymos is characterized as a coward, for allegedly throwing his shield away in battle, and thus one who has failed in his duty to defend the city as every good citizen is obliged to do. Euripides and Sokrates are presented as men who encourage the undermining of civic values, and thus as failures 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*); or, he is a corrupt overseer of the Athenian civic household, bent on personal gain at the people’s expense (*Knights*). When Kleon dies in 422/1, other demagogues, like Hyperbolos and Kleophon, become the more frequent targets of Aristophanes’ humor. But behind each man so ridiculed in comedy would 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 on themselves.

From the little that remains of Aristophanes’ rivals, Eupolis and Kratinos, it would seem that they too produced plays in a similar vein, although Kratinos is recorded as also producing a comedy on mythological themes, the *Dionysalexandros*, apparently a parody of the “Judgment of Paris” myth, with Dionysos replacing Paris as the figure who must judge the infamous beauty-pageant of the three goddesses. While ostensibly a mythological burlesque, the hypothesis (“plot summary”) reveals that “in the drama Perikles was very convincingly made fun of through innuendo for having brought the war on for the Athenians.”

To many modern critics the political content of tragedy is equally evident. In both its themes and its language, tragedy can be seen to be an extension of the political debates carried on in the law courts, assemblies, and councils of contemporary Athens, where its citizens were continually redefining themselves and their city through the enactment of new laws or the introduction of new policies that altered

to a greater or lesser degree the social institutions that we identified as the subject of debate in drama. Like comedy, tragedy takes the institutions of the city as its point of reference, but these are embedded in a framework of myth, in stories peopled with the great names of tradition, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Oedipus, Theseus, and the like. On the surface, then, it is more difficult for tragedy to be as blatantly topical as comedy, but this does not prevent it from addressing questions of political import for the *polis*.

A few tragic dramas are more transparently topical, or contain sections that make topical allusions, despite the fact that the majority are ostensibly set in the distant past. In the early days of the fifth century, it seems that 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 *Capture of Miletos* (493 or 492), he was assessed a heavy financial fine and this subject was forbidden to be dramatized again. Apparently, the *polis* did not appreciate being reminded of its failure to successfully aid the Milesians in their recent time of need.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458) provides one of the most frequently used examples of a drama which transparently 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 reforms to the Areopagus council's (462/1) composition and duties, Aeschylus boldly represents the "original" creation of this very 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. 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.

Earlier in this same play (289–91), Orestes is shown offering a pledge that would 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 earlier concluded a treaty that bound them together as allies. On one level, then, historical reality is backdated 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. Sophokles' *Antigone* and, to a lesser degree, his *Ajax* are both seen to offer comment on a state's right to impose restrictions on funerary ritual, even going so far as to question the justice of the state's ability to deny the right of burial to someone thought to have been a traitor. 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 war-fever that was driving the city to launch its massive armada against Sicily. The opening of Sophokles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* with the city of Thebes in the midst of plague has been taken as a reference to the

plague that devastated Athens in the opening years of the Peloponnesian war and used to assist in the dating of this play. However, while the playwrights may well have been affected, influenced, or inspired by contemporary events to select a particular myth with which to work, hunting for allusions to these events in every extant tragedy is not a particularly productive task.

Evidence of the relationship between the Athenian *polis* and tragic drama can more fruitfully be found in the study of the plays' engagement with the justness of various decisions and outcomes enacted in the dramas. The general theme of justice (*dike*) is perhaps the most common of themes across all three playwrights. It underlies every surviving play to a greater or lesser degree. For almost every situation upon which a tragedy is constructed, asking "where does justice lie in this situation?" can be an appropriate question. This question is raised by such plays as 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. Also 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 bleeds over into the institution of *xenia* (the guest-host relationship), which has the potential to pit the needs and obligations to friend and family against those of the community-at-large. This in turn leads to the larger political question concerning the demands over which socio-political institutions should take precedence in a given situation. While these problems are presented in the familiar story-line of myth, they can be easily extrapolated to apply to matters of importance to the contemporary audience where these same socio-political institutions give expression to civic values and shape modes of behavior deemed appropriate for a citizen. But the assessment of how well or poorly one treats one's friends is determined by 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, which tragic drama exploits to great effect, providing a basis on which to assess the justness of the contrary demands placed on the individual and so to reassess and make adjustments to 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 essentially "democratic" in orientation rather than "about the *polis*" in more general terms? Tragic drama was traditionally instituted in the Athenian *polis* under the tyranny of Peisistratos, and by 486, after the tyrant's overthrow and the first democratic reforms had been established, comedy, too, had its place in dramatic competitions of the City Dionysia. Our textual evidence for drama in terms of its complete texts all comes from a period when Athens was a democracy, and this evidence strongly suggests that drama was deeply engaged in the concerns of a democratic *polis* in which there was great pride. Particularly

notable in this regard are the twin principles of *isonomia* (“equality before the law”) and *parrhesia* (“freedom to speak”) on which democracy was founded, as they are represented in the tragedies.

Despite Hecuba’s belief in the culpability of Helen, she insists that Menelaos at least listen to her argument in defense of her actions (*Trojan Women* 906–10). Elektra, in Sophokles’ play of that name, on the other hand, suggests that Aigisthos should be denied the right to speak before his execution, for there is nothing he could say that 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 Tyndareos suggest that Orestes could have had his mother prosecuted for the murder of his father rather than dispatching her himself (*Orestes* 492–5), while 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.

More telling though is the manner in which drama itself is granted the freedom to question and criticize the values and socio-political institutions of the Athenian *polis* in the guise of the mythological reenactments of tragedy and the farcical representations of contemporary civic life in comedy. We do not know whether this 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.

Under democracy more citizens had been released to participate in the affairs of the city than under any other previous form of administration. But this freedom seems to have generated some perhaps unexpected problems. In Athens in the fifth century, the city’s decision-makers and leaders were, in principle if not in fact, the people. Ever since Homer and Hesiod, it had been a taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions of power had an obligation to honor the gods, which by extension meant to honor the law of the *polis*, often presented as divinely inspired. The problem with these divinely inspired laws and the socio-political institutions which they supported was that they were an inheritance from a period of aristocratic rule and in many cases ill-suited to the emerging ideals of a democratic *polis*. Couched in the equally traditional and aristocratic myths of the past in the case of tragedy (and also some comedies), or in the humorous fantasies of comedy, drama became the vehicle through which the city could celebrate its freedoms while it simultaneously challenged and interrogated some of its most cherished ideals.