I

PAUL CARTLEDGE

'Deep plays': theatre as process in Greek civic life

LIFE IMITATES ART?

Theatre as we understand it in the West today was invented in all essentials in ancient Greece, and more specifically in classical Athens. In Athens, however, theatre was always a mass social phenomenon, considered too important to be left solely to theatrical specialists or even confined to the theatres to be found both in the centre of Athens itself and in some of the constituent demes (villages or wards) of the surrounding civic territory of Attica. Athenian tragic drama did not have merely a political background, a passive setting within the polis, or city, of the Athenians. Tragedy, rather, was itself an active ingredient, and a major one, of the political foreground, featuring in the everyday consciousness and even the nocturnal dreams of the Athenian citizen.

This was especially the case after the establishment of an early form of democracy at Athens, the world's first such polity, towards the end of the sixth century BC, although some kind of tragic drama seems to have been developed and officially recognised several decades earlier during the relatively benign and populist rule of the aristocratic dictator Peisistratus (*c.* 545–528). Indeed, democratic Athenian political life in the fifth and fourth centuries was also deeply theatrical outside the formally designated theatrical spaces. Not only did the Athenians theatricalise their ordinary experience through ritual dramas of everyday life, in the manner of the African Ndembu studied by Victor Turner. There was a formal analogy or even identity between their experience inside and that outside the theatre, most notably in the performance of the constitutive communal ritual of animal blood-sacrifice. The latter serves also to remind us that Greek tragedy,

For their unstinting help with this chapter I am indebted to my friends and fellow-*choreutai* Simon Goldhill, Edith Hall, and Oliver Taplin, but above all to our general editor (both *koruphaios* and *chorēgos*) Pat Easterling. For the defects that remain, even those due to some heaven-sent *hamartia*, I accept full responsibility. My title is adapted from a famous article by the doyen of cultural anthropologists, Clifford Geertz, 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight' (see list of Works Cited).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

although as an art-form it developed its own professionally theatrical ethos and conventions, as a communal ritual never broke completely free of its originary cultic moorings.[1]

Athens was not the whole of classical Greece. It was just one among more than a thousand separate political communities stretching from Spain in the far west to Georgia on the Black Sea in the east, communities that collectively made up the cultural entity 'Hellas'. Yet in several ways, most notably its size and social complexity but chiefly its radically democratic way of life, and for economic and military as well as political and aesthetic reasons, Athens was both an exceptional and an exceptionally influential Greek city. This exceptionalism embraced a peculiarly intense devotion to the practice and dissemination of the visual, literary and performing arts. Already in the fifth century Athens had attracted to itself the flower of Greek intellectual life from all around the Mediterranean basin, including several tragic poets (Ion from Chios, Pratinas and Aristion from Phlius, Achaeus from Eretria, Spintharus from Heraclea on the Black Sea, and possibly Hippias from Elis and Acestor from Thrace). Throughout most of the fifth and fourth centuries, indeed, Athens was the undisputed cultural epicentre of all Hellas, its 'City Hall of Wisdom' in Plato's patriotic phrase.[2]

Thus defeat of Athens by its arch-rival and cultural antipode Sparta in the unhappily prolonged Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) did nothing to alter its focal cultural status. The local Attic dialect of Greek along with other markedly Athenian cultural forms (including tragedy) became the basis of that wider Hellenism which in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedon (334–323) spread eastwards through Asia as far as Afghanistan and the Punjab, and embedded itself more firmly nearer to home, in Egypt and the Levant as well as in Turkey, where Greek communities had been established along the Aegean coast since the turn of the last millennium BC. The newly founded or revitalised cities of Alexandria, Berytus and Pergamum bear eloquent witness to this novel, Hellenistic culture of the last three centuries BC, and it was principally through them, besides Athens itself, that the Greek heritage as a whole was transmitted to Rome and so eventually to contemporary Western civilisation.[3]

Central to this heritage is the idea of the theatre that was Athens' peculiar original invention and is still today a vital and vibrant part of the wider

[1] Origins/democratisation of tragedy: see final section of this chapter, and n. 31. Peisistratus and drama: Shapiro (1989) ch. 5. Ndembu: Turner (1973). Sacrifice: Detienne & Vernant (1989). Tragedy and religion: see nn. 7, 19.

[2] Greek world: Hornblower (1993); Jones et al. (1984). Athens as capital city of culture (Plato, *Protag*. 337d): Ostwald (1992).

[3] Alexander and Hellenism: Lane Fox (1980).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Hellenic legacy. To judge by our scattered and anecdotal literary evidence, and the more substantial testimony of archaeology in the shape of theatrical scenes depicted on vases, Athenian theatre struck a notably resonant chord in Sicily and South Italy (known later to the Romans as Magna Graecia or 'Great Greece'). Aeschylus, one of the founding fathers of developed Athenian tragedy, not only produced or re-produced his tragedies in Sicily but also met his death there, in *c.* 456. Some forty years later, a number of the Athenians held prisoner in Syracuse's stone quarries after the catastrophic failure of imperial Athens' attempt to conquer Sicily were said to have been reprieved in exchange for the recital of some verses of Euripides. It was immediately from Magna Graecia that Greek theatre moved house to Rome, as part of the process whereby in Horace's neat phrase 'captive Greece captivated its fierce conqueror and introduced the arts to rustic Latium'.[4]

The experience of Greek Sicily and South Italy, however, was just the most vivid illustration of a universal Greek theatrical phenomenon, whereby following the Athenian model a purpose-built stone theatre came to be as much of a fixture in Hellenic civic architecture as the *agora*. Equally interesting in its way, unless the anecdotal evidence is deceiving us, was the migration of Athenian playwrights to the Macedonian court of King Archelaus towards the end of the Peloponnesian War: both Euripides and his fellow-tragedian Agathon (whose maiden victory at the Great Dionysia festival of 416 provides the dramatic occasion for Plato's *Symposium*) beat a path to Pella and royal rather than democratic patronage. In other words, unlike some of the finest vintage wines, Athenian tragedy could travel, and in this we see the ultimate origins of the process through which Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have become 'classics' of the tragedians' art. But in this opening chapter it is the local and original quality of Greek tragedy, its Athenian bloom and quintessence, that provide the dominant themes and topics for discussion.[5]

THE ATHENIANNESS OF FESTIVAL HISTRIONICS

Clifford Geertz used the phrase 'the theater state' in the subtitle of his study of Bali in the nineteenth century. That description would be at least as apt for classical Athens. Alternatively, the culture of Athens may be viewed

[4] Idea of theatre: Finley (1980). Spread of Athenian theatre to South Italy: Taplin (1992) and (1993). Illustrations: Green & Handley (1995); Trendall & Webster (1971); and Ch. 4 below. Syracuse anecdote: Plutarch, *Nicias* 29. Fourth-century and later reception of fifth-century tragedy: Ch. 9 below.

[5] Civic architecture: Kolb (1979), (1981) and (1989); Whitehead (1995). Macedon's cultural attraction: Hatzopoulos & Loukopoulos (1981); cf. Easterling (1994).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

fruitfully as a 'performance culture' (cf. Ch. 3 below). The city celebrated more statewide religious festivals (in Attica as well as in Athens proper) than any other Greek polis. These included the two annual city play-festivals in honour of Dionysus, together with an unknown number of local festivals in the 140 or so demes. At least one of the local festivals, the Rural Dionysia, which all the demes celebrated, also served as a vehicle for formal theatrical performance, and it is possible that plays staged originally in one of the two 'national' festivals subsequently 'transferred' to one or other Attic venue. Deme inscriptions ([1] is an example) bear witness to a system of elite sponsorship modelled on that used for the central celebrations, and among the several known deme theatres that of Thorikos is a particularly impressive extant example.[6]

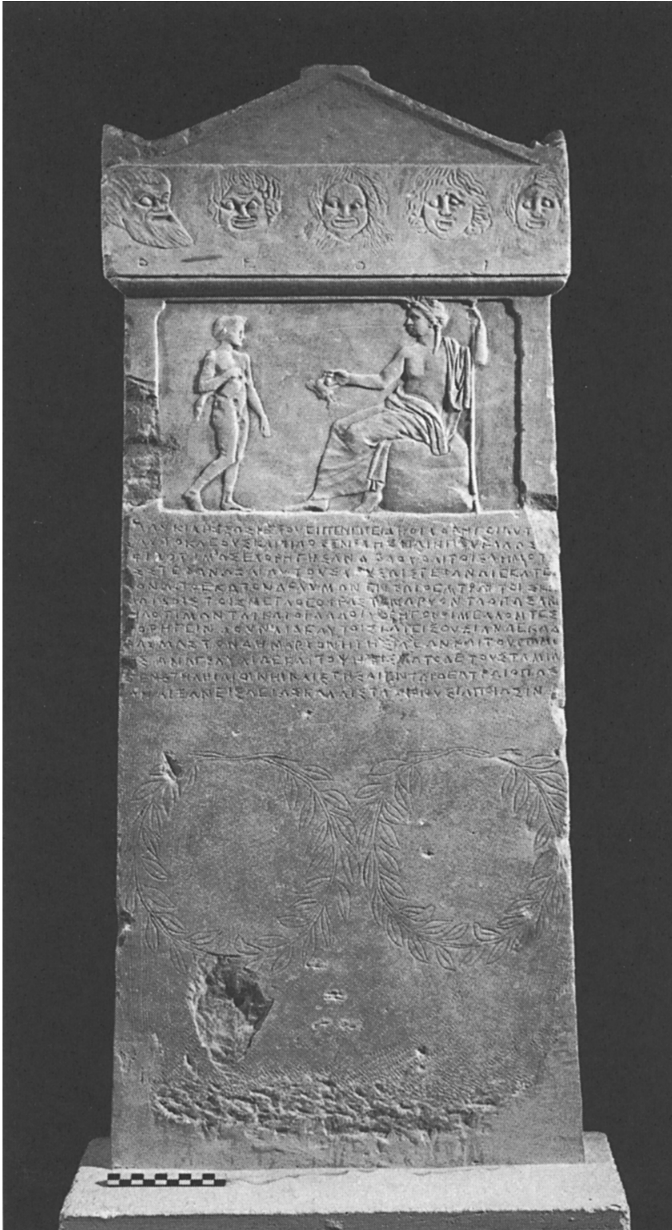
On one level, which we might be tempted to label secular, these festivals were an occasion for rest, relaxation and recuperation from the back-breaking round of manual labour that fell to the lot of the vast majority of the 200,000–250,000 inhabitants of Attica, male and female, citizen and non-citizen, slave and free, who in this radically pre-industrial society earned their living typically from farming Attica's not especially fertile terrain. But the festivals were also religious and political, or rather political because they were religious, since in ancient pre-Christian Greece the religious and the political were fabrics of thought and behaviour woven from the same threads. Thus they, and the play-festivals of Dionysus not least among them, served further as a device for defining Athenian civic identity, which meant exploring and confirming but also questioning what it was to be a citizen of a democracy, this brand-new form of popular self-government. The use of rituals – standardised, repeated events of symbolic character, symbolic statements about the social order – and especially the ritual of collective animal-sacrifice helped to sustain and reinforce that internalised Athenian civic identity.[7]

All Athenian tragedy was performed within the context of religious rituals in honour of one or other manifestation of that 'elusive but

[6] Phrase 'theater-state': Geertz (1980). 'Performance culture': Rehm (1992) ch. 1. Tragedy in context: Csapo & Slater (1995) (sources); Green (1994); Longo (1990); Scodel (1993); Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988); Walcot (1976); Wilson (1993); Winkler & Zeitlin (1990). Festivals (Rural Dionysia: Plato, *Rep.* 475d): Mikalson (1975); Parke (1977); Parker (1987); Whitehead (1986a) ch. 7 and (1986b).

[7] Nature of festival: Mikalson (1982); Cartledge (1985). Democracy: Hansen (1991). Slavery: see Ch. 5 below. Religion and politics: Bruit Zaidman & Schmitt Pantel (1992). Rituals: Osborne in Osborne & Hornblower (1994); Strauss (1985). Tragedy and ritual: Easterling (1993b); Rehm (1994); Seaford (1994); Sourvinou-Inwood (1994). Sacrifice and tragedy: Burkert (1966); Henrichs (1995) 97 n. 44. Identity: Boegehold & Scafuro (1994); Loraux (1986), (1993).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006



[1] Honorific *stēlē* from the Attic deme Aixone, set up in the theatre in the second half of the fourth century BC on behalf of two prizewinning *chorēgoi*. The relief depicts a satyr bringing a jug to fill Dionysus' wine-cup; on the fascia above are incised five comic masks.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

compelling god' Dionysus. The Great or City Dionysia was a spring festival celebrated annually towards the end of March or beginning of April in terms of our calendar. The Dionysus honoured here was the local patron god of Eleutherae, a village on the border between Attica and the region of Boeotia (of which the principal city was Athens' regular enemy, Thebes). This was a more grandiose and international affair than the older and more inward-looking Lenaea festival held during the depths of winter in January–February time. The Rural Dionysia, thirdly, honoured Dionysus 'in the fields'. Different demes celebrated this on different days but at the same time of the agricultural year, during the dead, rainy season of December–January a few weeks before the Lenaea.[8]

Dionysus' cult-title Lenaeus may have been derived from one of the artefacts essential for creating his *spécialité de la maison*, the fermented juice of the wine grape, namely the wine-vat. But the god's significance comprehended much more than vinous intoxication or agricultural fertility more generally. Quite why all tragedy, indeed all drama, at Athens was performed under the sign of Dionysus is still found problematic, although his association with illusion, transgression and metamorphosis was obviously germane to his theatrical status. The quintessential outsider, he was entirely appropriately worshipped in the form of a mask, which could both figure his absent presence and provide actors and chorus with the alibi and means of alienation required for the dramatic representation of others (and otherness). Nevertheless, Dionysiac devotion and religious experience, which could be personal and private as well as communal and civic, extended well beyond the formalised performance of drama and might carry very different implications and aspirations according to context. For instance, some aspects or forms of Dionysiac worship outside the theatre were notably, or notoriously, attractive to women, yet women were certainly excluded from active roles in dramatic representations and possibly also from spectating, which the Greeks regarded as an integral part of the performance. There is reason, moreover, for supposing that the Dionysus routinely worshipped in the Attic countryside was not the disturbing, even potentially lethal deity who periodically held sway in his theatre at the foot of the Athenian Acropolis.[9]

It is one of the paradoxes of our evidence for ancient Athenian democracy that the most articulate contemporary theorists and commentators were

[8] Quotation from Nagy in Carpenter & Faraone (1993) vii. All aspects of the Great/City Dionysia and the Lenaea: Pickard-Cambridge (1988). Archaeology: Simon (1983).

[9] See Ch. 2 for full bibliography. Masks, literal: Frontisi-Ducroux & Vernant (1983): Frontisi-Ducroux (1989), (1991) and (1995); Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 189–206; cf. Brook (1988) 217–31; Soyinka (1976) 38. Masks, metaphorical: Carpenter & Faraone (1993).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

almost to a man deeply hostile to it on principle – on the grounds that it constituted the dictatorship of the ignorant and poor many, the proletariat as it were, over their social and intellectual betters, the elite few (such as themselves). Perhaps the foremost of these diehard critics, or implacable foes, was Plato, who found himself unable to avoid paying grudging and veiled tributes to the importance of Athenian democratic theatre, so central was it to Athenian civic and cultural life. The dialogue form with which his name is inseparably linked may well have owed much to his first-hand experience of Athenian dramatic exchanges. One of his best-known dialogues, as we have seen, has an explicitly tragic connection. And in his final work of extreme old age, the *Laws*, which he called ironically the 'best' sort of tragedy, he coined the punning term 'theatrokratia', meaning literally the sovereign rule of the theatre-audience, to refer to the dictatorship of the mass (or mob) of poor Athenian citizens who formed the majority of the spectatorship, as they formed the ruling majority of the Athenian democratic state as a whole.[10]

Further testimony to the perceived importance of the theatre in Plato's day (*c*. 428–347) is the long-running public controversy that raged over the best use of the city's Theoric or Festival Fund, from which a small 'dole' was given to enable even – or especially – the poorest citizens to pay their theatre entrance-fee. Financially, in terms of the public assets of the state as a whole, the Theoric Fund was no doubt 'very small beer'. But that merely corroborates its enormous symbolic significance as a token of democratic ideology. As Thucydides' Pericles famously observed during a performance of the city's annual grand and solemn ritual of state funeral for its war dead, no Athenian should be debarred by simple poverty from playing his full part in democratic debate and action. And such debate and action took place in the theatre no less than in the other democratic arenas to be considered below. This explains how the Theoric payments could be colourfully but not fantastically labelled by one prominent fourth-century politician as 'the glue of the democracy'; and how, fantastically, the hero of Aristophanes' *Peace*, which was staged in 421 just as a real peace was about to be concluded with Sparta, could make a present to the Council, the Athenians' chief administrative body, of Theoria, the personified goddess of Festival.[11]

[10] Critics of democracy: Jones (1957) ch. 3; Roberts (1994). Plato's politics: Finley (1977b). His 'theatrokratia': *Laws* 701b; cf. *Rep*. 492b–c (theatre as a characteristically mass gathering on a par with the Assembly, People's Court and military camp). Spectating: Segal (1995). Plato's 'anti-tragic theater' (esp. *Laws* 817a – the 'best' tragedy): Nussbaum (1986) 122–35; Euben (1990).

[11] Theoric Fund as 'very small beer': Jones (1957) 34. Theoric Fund as 'glue of the democracy':

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

It is not certain that the Theoric Fund was already in existence in the fifth century. But the principle of payment from public funds for political participation was firmly established in the 450s, when Pericles introduced a small *per diem* payment for jurors serving in the People's Court, and a similar grant began to be made to Athenian infantrymen on active duty. On the other hand, the semi-private, semi-public 'liturgical' system of financing the choral and dramatic festivals was certainly in place by the time of Pericles' death in 429, indeed well before, since he had himself as a young man performed this official function for Aeschylus in 472. A liturgy was literally a work performed on behalf of the people; under the Athenian democratic regime of public taxation, it became a legally enforceable obligation. It was imposed on wealthy citizens (and in some cases resident aliens) possessing a certain, very high, minimum value of property to compel them to contribute from their own pockets to the expense of running the state. Liturgies, of which there could be over a hundred in any one year, were of two main kinds: military, that is naval (the upkeep of a state warship for a year), and festival. Of the latter, the one that concerns us particularly here is the tragic *chorēgia*, payment for a tragic (and satyric) chorus at the Dionysia or Lenaea.[12]

About the time of Pericles' death, which coincided approximately with the birth of Plato, another extreme if idiosyncratic anti-democrat penned a splenetic pamphlet that is our earliest surviving Attic prose composition. The anonymous author, fondly if probably inaccurately known as the 'Old Oligarch' (he was certainly an oligarch), fulminates against this Athenian liturgy system of sponsorship of the arts, which he represents as a sort of gigantic confidence trick to redistribute the wealth of the elite compulsorily to the differential benefit of the poor mass of the Athenian citizen body. To which a committed democrat such as Pericles would surely have replied, no less vehemently and with rather better justification, that, as the favour of the gods was likely to be won by lavish expenditure on religious display, private funds ought to be channelled into the magnification of the state's religious festivals no less unstintingly than the public expenditure that was then being poured into public religious buildings, most conspicuously those on the Acropolis. Besides, super-rich liturgy-payers who fulfilled their obligations with gusto stood to gain at best enormous public good will and political

Demades *ap*. Plutarch, *Moral Essays* 1011b. Theoric payments generally: Buchanan (1962). Periclean Funeral Speech: Thuc. 2.35-46, at 38; state funeral: Loraux (1986).

12 Jury-courts: Hansen (1991) ch. 8; Cartledge, Millett & Todd (1990). Liturgies, general: Davies (1967), (1971) and (1981). Liturgies, naval: Gabrielsen (1994). (A comparable work on festival liturgies as a whole is desiderated.) Tragic *chorēgia*: Wilson (1993) and (forthcoming). Minimum age of *chorēgos*: Golden (1990) 65–7. See further below, pp. 18–19.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

support, at worst some protection against an accusation in the courts of anti-democratic prejudice and subversion.[13]

Somewhat less acrimonious witness to the all-pervasive cultural influence of tragedy is borne by the pioneer historians of the fifth and fourth centuries. Herodotus, who was not himself an Athenian citizen but had close connections both with Athens itself and with the South Italian colony of Thurii sponsored chiefly by Athens, betrays a strong bond of shared moral, theological and indeed tragic outlook with both Aeschylus (they had common subject matter in the Persian Wars) and Sophocles (tradition spoke of a personal friendship between them). As for Thucydides, the whole intellectual cast of his historiography has been seen as generically tragic and specifically Euripidean in both approach and tone. From the world of lived experience rather than theoretical reflection comes a suggestive anecdote preserved by Diodorus of Sicily, the first-century BC Greek author of a 'universal' history. Immediately before one of the crucial Peloponnesian War sea-battles, off the Arginousai islands in 406, the Athenian admiral (and later democratic hero) Thrasybulus dreamed that he and six of his fellow-admirals were in a packed theatre playing the roles of the Seven against Thebes in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (first staged at Athens a few years previously). Against them he saw ranged the enemy commanders, in a different play but by the same author, the *Suppliant Women* (of the 420s), and from this vision he is said to have inferred, correctly, that the Athenians would win the naval battle, but only just.[14]

THE MENTALITY OF *AGONIA*

That anecdote may be evidence for the dissemination of tragedy in Thrasybulus' day by private means, either through written texts or by dramatised readings at upper-class symposia perhaps. It is certainly evidence for competition between plays at Athens, though in real waking life that occurred between plays by different authors. The ancient Greek word for competitiveness is *agōnia*, from which comes English 'agony', and 'agony' in our sense aptly enough captures the awfulness of the internecine and fratricidal Peloponnesian War. But for the Greeks that ruinous struggle was also literally an *agōn* or contest, animated by *agōnia* in its primary Greek

[13] 'Old Oligarch' = Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 1.13. Practicality (and rhetoric) of liturgy-payment: Ober (1989); Wilson (1991) and (1993). Acropolis building programme: Wycherley (1978) chs. 4–5.

[14] Herodotus: Waters (1985) 21. Thucydides: Finley (1967); Macleod (1983) ch. 13. Thrasybulus' dream: Diodorus 13.97.6. Dreams generally: Kyrtatas (1993) (esp. essay by K. Valakas). Athenocentrism of tragedy: see further Ch. 5 below.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

[2] This small, late-fifth-century Attic red-figure calyx-crater depicts on its main surface a theatrically costumed *aulos*-player flanked by what seem to be two chorus members dressed as fighting cocks. Any identification of the scene must remain speculative.

signification of fight-to-the-death, zero-sum competitiveness. As one anonymous fifth-century philosopher (not necessarily an Athenian) observed, 'people do not find it pleasant to honour someone else, for they suppose that they themselves are being deprived of something'.

Perhaps the sharpest illustration of this Greek competitive attitude is to be seen in the cock-fight. The Athenians were typically Greek in their passion for cock-fighting, and they used it also as a metaphor for masculine rivalry, erotic or otherwise, in life as in art. Aristophanes, for instance, is said to have portrayed Right and Wrong Arguments as two fighting cocks in the original staged version of *Clouds* (423), and a contemporary vase-painting may actually depict that theatrical scene [2]. In a real cock-fight the defeated

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

bird, if not actually slaughtered, was given the derogatory tag of 'slave', recalling a famous dictum of Heraclitus of Ephesus (*c.* 500) concerning human war, that it 'is the king and father of all: some it makes free, others slaves'.[15]

Cock-fighting, though, was a continuation of human warfare by other, avian means, not an alternative to or substitute for the real thing. The true site for the display of Greek manhood and masculine prowess was always the battlefield, the ancient Greek term for pugnacious bravery being precisely 'manliness' (*andreia*). War was to a Greek man, it has been justly remarked, what marriage was to a Greek woman: in each sphere they respectively fulfilled what their culture deemed to be their essential natures. The ancient Athenians, who in the fifth and fourth centuries were at war – usually from choice – by both land and sea for on average three years in every four, found plenty of opportunity to put their virility to the test. A particularly graphic witness to this relentless bellicosity is provided by the official casualty-list set up in about 460 BC by one of the ten Athenian tribes (artificial political-geographical divisions of the citizenry); this proudly enumerates its 177 dead, including two generals, who had been killed during a single year and in battlegrounds stretching from the Greek mainland to Cyprus. If that figure were to have been reproduced across all ten tribes, something approaching three per cent of the entire Athenian citizen body would have died in battle in that one year. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that obsession with the destructiveness of war comes across so strongly as a theme and subject for debate in tragedy, in *Agamemnon*, *Ajax*, *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*, among many other plays.[16]

War, however, although archetypal, was not by any means the only kind of *agōn* known to and lovingly practised by the Athenians. Competitive athletic sports or games, also a Greek invention within an originary religious framework, were another field of peculiarly masculine valour, sometimes indeed, in the case of the combat sports, almost a paramilitary exercise. The Athenians' Panathenaic Games held every fourth year since 566 were easily the largest such celebration staged by an individual Greek city and fell not far short in magnificence of the 'Circuit' of Panhellenic Games, also quadrennial, held at Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea. Hippolytus,

15 Symposia: Murray (1990). Greek 'contest-system': Gouldner (1965). Fifth-century philosopher = Anon. Iamblichi (? = Democritus of Abdera), *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* 2: 400. Cock-fighting: Csapo (1993); Hoffmann (1974). See also n. 6, above.

16 Nature of Greek warfare by land: Hanson (1989), (1991), (1995). By sea: Morrison & Coates (1986). Brief survey of Athens at war: Jones et al. (1984) ch. 6. War/marriage analogy: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 23. Erechtheid casualty-list: Fornara (1983) no. 78.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

eponymous subject of two tragedies by Euripides, was a conspicuously keen sportsman.

The idea of war and athletics as essentially competitive does not strike us as odd. Nor do we seem to find anything especially strange in competition between motion pictures at film 'festivals' such as the annual jamboree at Cannes. The Greeks, however, saw nothing odd in theatrical competition either, in which they engaged to the hilt. In the Dionysia and Lenaea festivals there was competition both between the plays or rather groups of plays (and playwrights, actors and liturgist-impresarios) and within the plays (between the leading characters or themes or ideas), and their idea of a one-off performance of a play or group of plays corresponded exactly to the one-off, everything-at-stake character of a Greek pitched battle by land or sea. Occasionally the connection between theatre and war (a connection that we but not they exploit metaphorically) could be made even more dramatically concrete, as when in 403, during the brief but bloody civil war between an oligarchic pro-Spartan junta and the democratic Resistance organised by Thrasybulus, the democrats mustered for battle in the theatre of the port district of Piraeus. The ceremony held to celebrate the restoration of democracy later that same year was a classic instance of the Athenians making a ritualised drama out of a political crisis.[17]

In a city peculiarly governed (in both senses) by use of the spoken word in public arenas, Athenian theatre was perhaps predictably dominated by antagonistic debate. *Hupokritēs*, literally 'answerer', was the standard word for actor, and *hupokrisis* was also used to mean non-theatrical rhetorical debate. Antagonistic debate was of the essence, too, in the democratic People's Court, which convened in several different spaces within the Agora, in the court of Areopagus, and in various other courts, before which lawsuits, another sort of *agōn*, were played out in dramatised adversarial format. The Athenians indeed, like the modern Americans, had a formidable, and not wholly undeserved, reputation for litigiousness to rival their reputation as theatregoers, and their experience in one sphere was easily transferable to the other, not least through the practice of creating a hubbub (*thorubos*) to influence the verdict.

The first of the ten canonical Attic orators, Antiphon of the deme Rhamnous, is said quite plausibly to have written tragedies, as well as speeches for his – usually oligarchic – clients in the lawcourts; pupils of

[17] Panathenaic Games: Neils et al. (1992). Olympics: Cartledge (1985) 103–13. Athenian athletics: Kyle (1987). Combat sports: Poliakoff (1987). Dionysia and Lenaea as competitive festivals: Osborne (1993). *Agōn* within tragedy: Duchemin (1968); Lloyd (1992). 403 BC civil war: Xenophon, *Hellenica* 2.4. Post-civil war reconciliation ritual: Strauss (1985) 69–72. Civic ceremonial and political manipulation: Connor (1987).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Isocrates, founder of Athens' first institute of advanced rhetoric in the early fourth century (not long before Plato opened his Academy), are credited with the same feat. The speech Antiphon gave in his own defence on a charge of oligarchic high treason did not get him acquitted but it did earn the highest praise from Thucydides, no mean critic. Composing pleas to suit the ethos of a client, who had to appear to act on his own behalf, was after all not that far removed from writing a script for characters in a staged dialogue. Some forensic speechwriters, moreover, were also regular protagonists in legal actions, seemingly fancying themselves as actors in the process. Aeschines, indeed, the principal political opponent of Demosthenes, had actually started in public life as a tragic actor, anticipating the more recent and rather more successful careers of President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II.[18]

Besides a structure of competitive performance in front of lay citizen 'judges' representing the People of Athens, tragic drama also shared with litigation such significant subject-matter as wrongdoing towards both gods and men and its punishment, including debate over what punishment best fitted the criminal. In their role as civic teachers (cf. p. 21 below), tragedians were expected to contribute to popular understanding of the ways in which the gods sought to impose or foster justice among men. Moreover, the tragedians' dramatic exploitation of technical legal language and ideas underlines the affinity between the theatre and the courts. We have become perhaps too familiar through the medium of television with the notion of staged courtroom drama, but it was a bold, imaginative and above all original stroke on the part of Aeschylus in his *Eumenides* to stage a trial scene with a jury and an enacted vote, a genuine *coup de théâtre* not apparently emulated by his successors.

In short, a good case can be made for there having been a productively dialectical relationship between Athenian drama and lawcourt procedure. Conversely, it came naturally to Athenian forensic speechwriters to draw on tragedy in order to dramatise and strengthen their case. Thus Demosthenes in 343, when prosecuting Aeschines for alleged misconduct of an embassy to King Philip of Macedon, quoted from a speech of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Half a dozen years later Lycurgus, the leading statesman of the 330s and 320s who was responsible for having the first all-stone theatre of

[18] Athens as 'city of words': Goldhill (1986) ch. 3; O'Regan (1992) ch. 1. Interplay between theatre and courtroom: Ober & Strauss (1990); Bers (1994); Hall (1995). See further Ch. 6 below. Litigation as *agōn*: Chaniotis (1993); Faraone (1991). Antiphon: Cartledge (1990). Praise of Antiphon's last speech by Thucydides: 8.68.1. People's Court and litigiousness: see n. 12. Adjudication in Dionysia: Pope (1986). Isocrates: Too (1995). Aeschines: Lane Fox (1994).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Dionysus constructed and papyrus copy-texts of plays by the three 'classic' fifth-century tragedians committed to the public archives, elected to perform Praxithea's famous patriotic speech from Euripides' (mainly lost) *Erechtheus* as an integral part of his successful public prosecution of Leocrates in 336.[19]

THE MENTALITY OF PARTICIPATION

After much lucubration Aristotle in his *Politics* ended by defining the Greek citizen as the person relevantly qualified by gender (male), age (adult), and social status (free, legitimate, of citizen descent) who had an active share in public decision-taking (including the giving of judicial verdicts) and office-holding. In practical reality, he added with some reluctance (since, ethically and ideologically, he was not a democrat), such a theoretical definition applied most closely to the citizen of a democratic state. Athens was the most radical Greek democracy on offer. Here there was no property qualification for the holding and exercise of democratic citizenship, and official governmental functions were performed routinely by a remarkably high percentage of the normally 30,000 or so citizens. Yet even in egalitarian Athens there was a palpable gap between the theory and the practice. Although every citizen counted for one and no one for more than one when voting in the Assembly, it was easier for the wealthier, leisure-class Athenians to attend meetings if they wished; and there were certain vital military and financial officers elected by the Assembly who by law or in practice were drawn only from the wealthiest citizens. Birth too continued to be a factor of discrimination, as is amply attested by Euripides' dramatic questioning and subverting of its claims, for example in *Electra*. On the other side, it was apparently the poorer (and perhaps older) citizens who predominated among the jurymen of the People's Court. In warfare too there were important social-class divisions between the most opulent, who could serve as cavalrymen, the moderately wealthy who could provide their own heavy equipment and serve as hoplite infantrymen, and the poor majority of the citizens who served as rowers of the trireme warfleet. The latter was the basis of Athens' external power, including in the fifth century an overseas empire, yet a public social stigma seems still to have been attached to the oar-pulling 'thetes' (whose ancient name meant literally 'dependent labourers').[20]

[19] Tragedy and punishment: Fisher (1992); Williams (1993). Tragedy as theodicy: Mikalson (1991); Yunis (1988). Trial-scene in *Eumenides*: Goldhill (1992) 89–92. Demosthenes and Creon: Dem. 19.247. Lycurgus' career: Humphreys (1985a). Lycurgus and Praxithea: Lyc. 1.100. (On Eur. *Erechtheus* see also below, p. 19.)

[20] Aristotle's citizen: *Politics* 1274b31–78b5, with Cartledge (1993) 108–11. Participatoriness of Athenian democracy: Sinclair (1988).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

The tragic theatre, characteristically, both confirmed and questioned the participatoriness of Athenian democracy. With the Assembly tragedy shared the common features of being a ritualised performance partaking of the sacred (every Assembly meeting began with a blood-sacrifice and prayers) that served to construct and reinforce a strong sense of the Athenians as a religious and political community. Yet, from the point of view of democratic participation, experience in the Assembly and experience in the tragic theatre also differed in important respects. Whereas a normal attendance at the Assembly in the fourth century, bolstered by the introduction of pay for attendance in *c.* 400, amounted to about a quarter of the qualified citizenry, a performance of tragedy at the Great Dionysia might attract a figure nearer to fifty per cent. Moreover, whereas the number of active 'performers' at an Assembly meeting could be counted on the fingers of not many more than two hands, there were some 1,200 needed annually at the Dionysia festival, if one includes the ten competing tribal choirs of men and ten of boys singing dithyrambs. Speakers in the Assembly, who tended in the main to come from those known semi-officially as 'the public speakers (*rhētores*) and politicians', were normally of elite social status, but citizens even from relatively humble backgrounds might as actors impersonate kings or gods. In all these ways tragedy was if anything even more democratic than the Assembly.[21]

On the other hand, the discourse of tragedy as often fractured as it confirmed that comforting corporate identity. Consider first the elevated social status of most stage characters in tragedy. It would have been hard for the average citizen, however strongly he might have considered himself to be a lineal descendant, morally speaking, of the noble Homeric heroes, to identify himself with these larger-than-life characters – in those cases, that is, where they were represented as figures worthy of admiration or imitation. Most Athenians, as we have seen, were trireme oarsmen, not cavalrymen or hoplites, yet despite the regular use of nautical imagery and metaphors from rowing in tragic verse, it was very rare for the majority in the audience to see themselves – or vaguely kindred mythological prototypes of themselves – represented on the tragic stage, as in the sailor-choruses of the Sophoclean *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. The *Persians* of Aeschylus, therefore, which ends with a reference to triremes, was doubly exceptional in actually describing the Salamis sea-battle fought and won by real Athenians, including members of the audience, just eight years before. Normally and normatively, on the tragic stage as off, the hoplites' ideology of solidary

[21] Assembly, 'orators', etc.: Hansen (1987) and (1991) ch. 11. Numbers attending tragedy: see Ch. 3 below.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

service and unflinching fortitude was assumed to be dominant. Yet not even the hoplites escaped entirely unscathed. Medea's famously unfavourable comparison of the terrors and pains of a woman's childbirth to the frontline battle experience of a male hoplite was no doubt undercut somewhat by her status as a woman, barbarian and sorceress, in short, an outsider. But the chorus of Euripides' *Helen* are presented wholly sympathetically when they declaim 'Madmen are you who seek glory in combat, among the spearshafts of war, thinking in ignorance to find a cure for human misery there.'[22]

A POLITICAL THEATRE?

In a straightforward and broad sense all Athenian tragedy was political, in that it was staged by and for the polis of the Athenians, through its regular public organs of government, as a fixed item in the state's religious calendar. The Great or City Dionysia, being a comparatively recent creation, was in the charge of the senior member (sometimes known as the Eponymous, since the civil year was named after him) of the board of nine annually appointed Archons. The Lenaea, on the other hand, as a more ancient and 'traditional' festival, was under the management of the Archon known as the 'King', the city's chief religious official (though he had no special religious vocation or qualifications). Organising a civic festival was regarded as on a par with organising the state's war-effort, so the Eponymous, just as he oversaw the financing of the fleet through the trierarchic liturgy-system, was likewise responsible for appointing the six *chorēgoi* who would undertake the festival liturgy of funding the choruses for each of three tragedians and three comic dramatists. That indeed was apparently his first official task on assuming office in the summer. He it was too who 'gave a chorus to' the tragedians whose work would be staged in the coming spring: that is, he selected the successful applicants, formally at any rate. And he was also somehow responsible for assigning a principal actor to each playwright, whose services were remunerated from public funds. These actors had to be citizens, since they were considered to be performing a properly civic function – in sharp contrast to the theatre in Rome, where acting was rather despised as something foreign, effeminate, fake, licentious, in short illegitimate and un-Roman.[23]

For the Dionysia, the *chorēgoi* also had to be citizens, but that rule was

[22] Homeric nobility: Gernet (1981) 333–43. Dominant hoplite ideology: Loraux (1986). Medea: Hall (1989a) index s.v. Outsiders and tragedy: Vidal-Naquet (1992). *Helen* chorus: 1151–4.

[23] Civic officials: Develin (1989). Civic organisation: Pickard-Cambridge (1988). Roman theatre (e.g. Livy 24.24): Rawson (1985) and (1987).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

relaxed somewhat for the Lenaea, where wealthy resident aliens too might be summoned to choregic liturgy duty and, if successful, have their victory commemorated publicly and permanently in stone. Further significant differences were that at the Lenaea tragedy and comedy were late insertions in an ancient festival, whereas drama and the Dionysia had come together much sooner, if not indeed from the outset; and, secondly, that the Dionysia was much more of an international affair than the Lenaea, with the city putting itself on show for the sake of the effect on others no less than for internal consumption. During the Dionysia, indeed, no effort was spared to impress on all participants, Athenian or foreign, from the outset that this was a ritual of the city as a city: not only through the prior strictly religious ceremonies of procession and sacrifice but also through the more narrowly political ceremonies performed within the theatre before the plays began. In the unlikely case of all this ceremonial proving insufficient, the point would have been made incontrovertibly by the theatre's physical setting up against the Acropolis citadel. The temple ruins (caused by Persian sack in 480 and 479) meeting the eye of any backwards-glancing spectator during the staging of *Persians* in 472 would have delivered a no less potent political message than the astonishing plenitude of civic and imperial architecture to which the audience's eyes were directed fifty years later by Euripides in the *Erechtheus*.[24]

Athenian tragedy was also 'political' in several other, more or less informal, senses. At its widest outreach, the Athenian democratic way of life could be represented as 'an education for all Hellas' (the famous phrase of Thucydides' Pericles in the Funeral Speech). But in the first instance participation in the democratic process, including being present to hear such a public civic oration, was conceived primarily as an education for Athenian citizens, most of whom had received no formal schooling during childhood beyond the inculcation (perhaps) of basic literacy, numeracy and musical appreciation. For such average citizens, tragic theatre was an important part of their learning to be active participants in self-government by mass meeting and open debate between peers. Only occasionally and generically were Athenian citizens themselves represented on the tragic stage, as for instance in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the chorus consisted of citizens from the deme of Colonus situated just outside the city of Athens – the deme of the playwright himself. Tragedy's characteristic method of instruction was analogical, allusive and indirect. Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, for example, is in a sense a play about education, or more specifically about the

[24] Exclusion of metics as *chorēgoi* at Dionysia: Hall (1989a) 163–4. Pre-play ceremonial at Dionysia: Goldhill (1990a). Erechtheus and rebuilt Erechtheum temple: Calder (1969).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

initiation of an ephebe (an adolescent on the verge of manhood) into full membership of adult male citizen society; other tragedies (e.g. *Hippolytus*) play variations on the ephebic theme. Among the many competing solutions to the problem of tragedy's origins is the suggestion that it developed somehow out of adolescent initiation ritual.[25]

Also politically educational in a broad sense was the urgency with which the highly charged theme of words and persuasion was played out again and again on the Athenian democratic stage both inside and outside the tragic theatre. Thucydides, for example, represents the leading democratic politician Cleon as lambasting the Assembly in 427 for being mere 'spectators of words, auditors of deeds', although this accusation was surely itself double-edged, given Cleon's own sharply honed rhetorical skills. In tragic drama Euripides makes Eteocles in the *Phoenician Women* lament the 'strife of warring words among mortals', and characters in many others of his plays comment adversely on the deleterious moral content and political impact of honeyed words and well-turned speeches, none more bitterly so than Hecuba in her name-play. In the innovative scenario of the concluding play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, where he puts the courtroom on stage, he uses emphatically marked religious language in pitting 'Holy Persuasion', the power that induced the retributive, kindred murder-avenging Furies to become the propitious, city-benefiting Eumenides, against the unholy persuasion through which first Agamemnon and then his murderous widow Clytemnestra are led or rather seduced to their unpropitious deaths.[26]

The other side of the coin, however, was the pragmatic necessity, not just the ideological desirability, of freedom, equality and openness of political speech in a system of direct participatory democracy such as that of Athens. This too receives its due tragic recognition. Democratic voters' hands were raised in the Athenian Assembly only after speeches had been delivered on either side of an issue, speeches which were indeed often their only source of reasonably authentic information on the subject literally in hand. (To save time, it would seem, the numbers of hands were usually assessed by tellers rather than counted individually.) The earliest known reference to democratic assembly voting is to be found in the *Suppliant Women* of Aeschylus (probably 463 BC), where King Pelasgus refers metonymically and of course

[25] Pericles quotation: Thuc. 2.40.1; cf. Ostwald (1992). Popular literacy: Harris (1989) ch. 4 (too negative); Harvey (1966) (perhaps too optimistic); Thomas (1992) ch. 7 (balanced). Music: West (1992); Storr (1992). Tragedy and ephebes: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 161–80; Winkler (1990b).

[26] Thuc. on Cleon: 3.38.4, with Macleod (1983) ch. 10. Eteocles: Eur. *Phoen.* 499; cf. *Hipp.* 486–7, 983–5; *Medea* 576–8; *Or.* 907–8; *Ba.* 266–7; and esp. Hecuba's denunciation of Odysseus in her name-play. Persuasion, esp. in tragedy: Buxton (1982); Bers (1994); Meier (1990) ch. 5. See further Ch. 6 below.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

anachronistically to 'the sovereign hand of the People' of Argos. A similar procedure of antagonistic formal debate obtained in the People's Court, though usually before a much smaller audience of 500 or so; but the voting here was by secret ballot. Through Assembly and Court the sovereign People of Athens wielded direct political power, and for the informed and wise exercise of their near-limitless authority the tragic poet's function as civic teacher – confirmed by Aristophanes' not entirely unserious parody of it in the *Frogs* – was no less valuable in its way than that of either orator or advocate.[27]

The Athenian tragic poet might therefore be described, adapting Shelley, as an acknowledged legislator of the word. Yet as with even the most perspicacious and farsighted of lawgivers, his teaching could be mightily and consciously controversial. Somewhat in the manner of the English theatre of the 1630s, for example, Athenian tragedies did not always merely reflect pre-formed moral and political ideas but moved ahead of contemporary thinking, exploring or problematising the practical and theoretical possibilities. Alternatively, they might remain within the usual bounds of received wisdom and conventional pieties, but do so in order the more deeply to explore and question them. For this genuinely was a theatre of ideas, within a culture not the least remarkable attribute of which was a capacity to encompass the most radical critiques of social mores and cultural norms in a stable institutional framework. It would be quite wrong therefore to see such questioning tragedy as necessarily the product and symptom of a culture in crisis. Nor, on the other hand (to correct any possible misunderstanding of what follows), was the fundamentally questioning, risk-taking sort of tragedy by any means the only sort staged, even in the undoubted crisis of the Peloponnesian War. The *Antigone* of Euripides, for example, was a very different exercise from the Sophoclean play of the same title, being a melodrama of disguise, recognition, capture and intercession, rather than a tragedy of civic and familial self-destruction. However, it is the problematic sort of tragedy that provides the best forum for understanding the tragedians' public pedagogical function as civic teachers.[28]

In his *Oresteia* trilogy, for example, Aeschylus does not merely celebrate the triumph of human civic justice, with crucial help from Athens' divine

[27] Equal freedom of public speech (*isēgoria*, *parrhēsia*): Hansen (1991) 83. Dating of Aesch. *Suppl.*: see edition of H. Friis Johansen and E. W. Whittle (1980) vol. 1, 21–9. Aeschylus' 'sovereign hand' (*Suppliant Women* 604): Easterling (1985); Meier (1993) 93. Tragedians as public teachers: Croally (1994); Gregory (1991); Meier (1993); Nagy (1990) 409ff.

[28] 'Theatre of ideas': Arrowsmith (1963). Scholarly disagreements on how to read tragedy as social and political comment or critique: see n. 29 and 40, and Ch. 13, below.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

patron. He chooses instead to problematise the nature of 'justice' itself. Although a strong preference for due legal procedures of dispute-resolution over the pursuit of private blood-feud emerges clearly enough from the plays' internal movement and final plot-resolution, it is surely among other things a tribute to Aeschylus' subtlety and indirection that scholars are still divided over the playwright's own political attitude to the major constitutional changes of the late 460s and to the politically motivated assassination of one of their principal authors, Ephialtes. Or take Sophocles' *Antigone*. Here two in principle compatible and indeed mutually supportive public norms – the unwritten laws of the gods and the man-made laws of the polis – are so construed by the principal antagonists that they inevitably clash head-on, with no serious possibility of harmonious and practical resolution as long as the terms of the argument are understood conventionally. Finally and most starkly, in Euripides' *Medea* Greek confronts Barbarian, and Man confronts Woman, while in his *Bacchae* the two faces of Dionysus – creative euphoria and lethal retribution – confront each other: no single right answer is offered or advocated. In short, tragic experience of this probing and unsettling kind was considered conducive to the formation of a better informed and more deeply self-aware community, and to its periodical political re-creation. For that reason no less than from considerations of recreation in another sense it was supported publicly and wholeheartedly.[29]

TRAGIC POLITICS IN CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

To put that and the other selected aspects of tragedy discussed above in a more precise developmental context, this chapter ends with an abbreviated chronological narrative attempting to relate the history of tragedy as a theatrical genre to that of the other formal institutions of the Athenian polity over the two centuries from the tyranny of Peisistratus (*c.* 545–528) to the forcible end of the democracy in 322.

As an artistic medium, tragedy antedates by some way the Cleisthenic reforms of 508/7 that ushered in the world's first democracy. Tragedy's antecedents, moreover, most conspicuously choral lyric, were not all endogenous to Athens. There is probably something to the tradition that credited the Athenian Thespis with the decisive innovation of dramatic dialogue between himself and a chorus and dated it to the 530s, when Athens was ruled by the fairly benign dictator Peisistratus. However, there

[29] Reading tragedy politically: contrast Podlecki (1966b); and Zuntz (1963); with Meier (1993); Rose (1992) e.g. 327. *Oresteia*: esp. Dodds (1966); Goldhill (1992). *Antigone*, various readings of: Steiner (1984). *Medea*: Hall (1989a) index s.v. *Bacchae*: Segal (1986) ch. 9; Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 381–412.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

is also much to be said for the modern view that the Great or City Dionysia did not become formalised as a theatre festival of tragic (and satyric) drama until about 500 BC; on this view, the festival in its new guise was a strictly democratic creation. Although some notion and definition of citizenship had existed at Athens since at least the reforms of Solon in about 600, the Cleisthenic reforms embodied a new, positive conception of active, democratic citizenship. Tragedy as we know it, which may have differed considerably from that pioneered by Thespis, could plausibly have come into being as a consequence of the re-scrutiny of traditional myth through the new democratic lens. This has been called tragedy's 'moment'.[30]

The fledgeling democracy depended on a twofold liberation: from dictatorship at home, and from foreign control. The myth that served as the political charter myth of the democracy was that of the Tyrannicides – historically false, in that Harmodius and Aristogiton had probably not killed a reigning tyrant and certainly were not democrats, but none the less authoritative, since democracy was conceived ideologically as the antithesis of dictatorship. On the foreign relations front, Sparta had briefly but ominously occupied Athens in 508, and in 507–505 sought to reverse Cleisthenes' reforms; and behind Sparta stood Athens' neighbours and enemies in Thebes and Chalcis, and possibly even the looming threat of the mighty Persian Empire.

The Dionysus who was worshipped at the Great Dionysia took his epithet from the border village of Eleutherae, originally Boeotian but now brought firmly within the ambit of Athens. The adoption – or nationalisation – of his cult was intended among other things to safeguard Athens' frontier against Boeotian encroachment. But Dionysus was also himself a god of liberation (another of his epithets, Lysios, meant precisely 'the liberator'), and the verbal similarity of Eleutherae to *eleutheria*, the Greek word for 'freedom', was too obvious to be missed. It might not therefore be stretching the imagination or the evidence too far to see the newly institutionalised theatre-festival of the Dionysia as a festival of democratic liberation. Archaeologists date the first, purpose-built theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the Acropolis to about 500 BC, so it would be economical of hypothesis to suggest that it was then too that dramatic performances were first transferred here from their previous venue, the Agora. Some Attic demes – notably Icarion, whose local traditions included associations with Dionysus' first arrival in Attica and with the beginnings of tragedy and comedy – may

[30] Thespis: Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 130–1. Reforms of Cleisthenes: Lévêque & Vidal-Naquet (1996); Ostwald (1988). Tragedy's 'moment': Vernant in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 23–8.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

also have begun staging tragedy less officially soon after 500 BC, for example during the Rural Dionysia.[31]

If the institutionalisation of the Great Dionysia as a tragedy-festival was indeed post-democratic, a transitional, experimental phase might be expected, during which playwrights, officials and the People as audience alike worked out what was and what was not suitable material for tragic representation. Such at any rate is what seems to have occurred, during roughly the first quarter of the fifth century. The principal issue then would seem to have centred upon the legitimacy of making tragic drama out of contemporary political experience as opposed to the traditional tales of myth and legend. Thespis reportedly had staged tragedies on traditional mythical themes – among them the stories of Pelias, Phorbas, and Pentheus – though we cannot of course say how he had handled or reworked the traditional material. So too did the leading tragedian of the first post-democratic generation, Phrynichus, to whose name are credited among others an *Actaeon*, *Alcestis*, *Antaeus*, *Daughters of Danaus*, and *Tantalus*. Twice at least, however, Phrynichus abandoned the ancient for the modern, indeed the absolutely contemporary, in what turned out to be a dangerously contentious move.

In the later 490s his *Capture of Miletus* took for its subject the traditional, indeed epic, theme of the sack of a city, but the city and sack in question in this tragedy were much closer to home than those of the Trojan cycle, since the play was about the annihilation by the Persians in 494 of Miletus, an Ionian Greek city with which Athens had both pragmatic and sentimental ties. The drama proved all too successfully affecting, and in accordance with democratic notions of legal responsibility it was the unfortunate author, not the Eponymous Archon who had granted him a chorus, who was saddled with a heavy fine. This was presumably imposed at the meeting of the Assembly that was regularly held in the theatre of Dionysus – not, as was otherwise usual, on the Pnyx hill – at the end of the Dionysia to review the festival's conduct. After a perhaps tactful interval of fifteen years or so, and emboldened no doubt by the Athenians' astonishing successes over the Persians in 480–79, Phrynichus returned to the contemporary mode with a group of tragedies including *Phoenician Women*, which made direct reference to the Persian Wars and for which the war-hero Themistocles may have acted as *chorēgos*.[32]

[31] Tyrannicides myth: Cartledge (1993) 32–3. Sparta and Athens: Cartledge (1979) 146–7. Theme of liberty in tragedy: de Romilly (1982). Great Dionysia as democratic liberation festival: Connor (1989); but see Osborne (1993) 27, 37–8. Archaeology of theatre: Wycherley (1978) 203–15. Icarion: Whitehead (1986a) 215–18.

[32] Early experimentation: Herington (1985) ch. 1. Phrynichus' *Miletou Halosis*: Hdt. 6.21. Themistocles as *chorēgos* for *Phoenissae*: Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 90, 236.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Some four years after Phrynichus' *Phoenician Women* Aeschylus followed suit with our earliest extant tragedy, the *Persians*, one of a group for which the barely adult Pericles served as *chorēgos*. Themistocles is never mentioned by name, and the action is set not in Greece but at the defeated Persian court in Susa. Yet there is no mistaking the play's direct contemporary reference and relevance. Salamis, the battle that both set Athens on her imperial course and solidly established the democratic constitution as the rule of the poor, trireme-rowing majority, is even explicitly described. The Athenian most responsible for the deeply controversial policy culminating in that famous and much celebrated victory was Themistocles, who at the time of the play's performance was embroiled again in a bitter political faction-fight that resulted soon after in his being at last ostracised (honourably exiled for ten years thanks to a majority vote against him of the 6,000-plus Athenians casting a ballot in the Agora). No known Greek tragedy after the *Persians* dealt with a contemporary theme centred on an actual event and a real political actor in quite the same way. Of course the Salamis affair is mythicised by Aeschylus (himself a participant), and tragic pathos is achieved by requiring the Athenian audience to sympathise somewhat, if not empathise, with their former – but also very much present – Persian enemies. Nevertheless, the audience, or Aeschylus, may well have felt that in this case tragic distancing and alienation had not been carried far enough, or conversely that the danger of blunting the cutting edge of tragedy's peculiar contribution to democracy by eliding the distinction between the theatre and the city's other public political spaces had not been clearly enough avoided.[33]

The original stated purpose of ostracism (from the Greek for 'potsherd', *ostrakon*, on which the names of 'candidates' were written or painted) may well have been to prevent the recurrence of tyranny; as such, it could have formed part of the Cleisthenic reform package. In practice, however, the device functioned to abort the outbreak of *stasis*, civil strife, or rather to stop civil strife spilling over into outright civil war (also called *stasis*). This it certainly helped to do, until its last recorded use at Athens in 417 or 416, whereafter it was superseded by other political instruments, chiefly involving use of the People's Court. But Athenian democratic politics were always a high-tension, high-risk business, and the threat of *stasis* was rarely all that far beneath the surface of everyday events. In the five years or so after 461, following the assassination of the democratic reformer Ephialtes, civil war came as close to erupting outright at Athens as at any time before the final phase of the Peloponnesian War. Hence, surely, the remarkably

[33] *Persians*: Hall (1989a) index s.v.; and (1996).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

urgent plea for avoidance of *stasis* at all costs that Aeschylus in his *Eumenides* (458) placed paradoxically in the mouths of the traditionally vengeance-driven Erinyes (Furies) and caused Athena to echo. Not that Aeschylus offered any specific political solution or nailed his colours to any personally identifiable political mast: a middle way between tyranny and anarchy, and 'great advantage for the city from their terrifying faces' (as Athena remarks of the Erinyes/Eumenides), were almost the limit of his detailed prescriptions.[34]

The democratic reforms of Ephialtes were abetted and, despite or thanks to his murder, extended by Pericles, most significantly by the introduction of political pay to compensate those citizens selected by lot to serve on the mass juries of the People's Court. In the 450s, thanks mainly to the Empire but also to a variety of internal sources of revenue, Athens' public coffers were unusually full, and the notion of payment for political service was both ideologically democratic, in that it enabled poor citizens as well as rich to participate actively in politics, and economically attractive. A further application of the same principle affected the tragic theatre, by way of the introduction of payment for actors and a cash prize for the best actor at the Dionysia in about 450. A few years later, such was its growing popularity, tragedy was introduced also on the same conditions alongside comedy at the more ancestral and Athenocentric Lenaea festival, although comedy seems to have continued to rank relatively higher here than at the Great Dionysia, where it had been formally recognised only in 486.[35]

So far, most of this chapter has been men-only and male-ordered, but mention of *Eumenides* with its prominent, indeed decisive, female protagonists (played of course by male actors) prompts separate reflection on the role and status within the democracy and its tragic theatre of the other half of the Athenian citizen population, women. The two ablest philosophers of Classical Athens, Plato and Aristotle, were also teacher and pupil. Yet in their attitude to women they differed markedly and between them covered almost the entire spectrum of possible male attitudes to the female Other. Plato has sometimes been hailed as a feminist, or proto-feminist, for his treatment of some, very few, women as the intellectual peers of some, also very few, men in his *Republic*. But the *Republic* was only a sketch of a political utopia, not necessarily a blueprint for some pragmatically realisable

34 Ostracism: Vanderpool (1970). *Stasis*: Lintott (1982); Ste Croix (1983) 78–9, ch. 5. Athenian democratic politics: Finley (1985) esp. ch. 2. *Eumenides* references: 696–7, 987–9; cf. Meier (1990) ch. 5.

35 Political pay for People's Court: Markle (1985). Pay for actors: Ghiron-Bistagne (1976) 179ff.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

polity, and it is doubtful whether his representation of the women partners of the ruling Guardian class would have been taken as implying much if anything for male Greek attitudes to their real-life female dependants (never partners). Aristotle, on the other hand, in his philosophical sociology of Greek political life was ever the prophet of things as they are, and he began from and returned to what he took to be the received and reputable opinions held by reasonable men (males). His considered sociobiological view that women were deformed, incomplete males and therefore designed by nature to be subservient to men may strike us as extreme, distasteful, even absurd, but we may be sure that it far more accurately reflected the gendered images of the average Greek citizen male than did Plato's utopian vision. If corroboration be sought, we need look no further than the theatre of Dionysus, to the absurdist comic fantasies of Aristophanes. To get some idea of how life really was outside the theatre, we might profitably start by turning right side up the upside-down worlds of his *Lysistrata*, *Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* and *Women in Assembly*. The fictive women of tragedy were a different, and as usual far more ambivalent and complex, matter.[36]

Athenian women, in the sense of the mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters of Athenian citizen men, were 'citizens' only by courtesy, in all respects but one – religion. The feminine form of 'citizen' was rarely used, and Athenian women were usually referred to either as 'female inhabitants of Attica' or, more puzzlingly, as 'townswomen'. They were never granted the full rights and corresponding duties of active political citizenship that they would have required to participate in the governmental arenas of Assembly or People's Court. There, in part, lies the black humour of Aristophanes' *Women in Assembly*, which has probably mistakenly been seen as partaking of the same 'feminist' tendency as Plato's *Republic*. In this comic fantasy (or nightmare scenario) formerly respectable citizen wives in male-citizen disguise 'pack' an Assembly meeting in order to outvote the relatively few male citizens so far present and carry a motion handing over the governance of Athens to women. But this Aristophanic brave new world is no Platonic or any other sort of utopia; rather it is a dystopian feminocracy in which the horrors of enforced economic communalism are exceeded only by the outrageous legislation passed to enable the women to gratify their naturally voracious and uncontrollable sexual appetites. Perhaps at the time the play was staged (in about 392) proto-feminist ideas

[36] Plato on women: Kraut (1992) 44–5 n. 49. Aristotle on women: Cartledge (1993) 66–70; Lloyd (1983) 94–105. Aristophanes on women: Cartledge (1995) ch. 4. Tragedy and women: n. 40, and Chs. 3 and 5 below.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

were in the air at Athens, but if so, this play was calculated to bring them back down to earth with a resounding crash.[37]

In the real world, religion was the one public activity in which Athenian women might achieve parity or even superiority of esteem *vis-à-vis* their menfolk. The annual Thesmophoria festival, for example, which Aristophanes gently sent up in one of his women-plays, was the most important of several women-only public festivals celebrated throughout Greece, not only in Athens; and in the sphere of death, burial and mourning the women of Greece had traditionally taken the more active and more publicly demonstrative religious role. Correspondingly, the one civic function approximating to the holding of public political office by men that Greek citizen women might legitimately perform, indeed were required to perform, was to serve as priestess of an officially recognised city cult, usually of a female divinity. The most ancient Athenian priestesshoods, notably that of the city's divine patron Athena Polias, were tied to families of the hereditary nobility who styled themselves Eupatrids (literally, 'lineal descendants of good fathers'). But as with all other public offices at Athens, the rule of exclusive aristocratic prerogative was gradually relaxed, and it was a sure sign of the triumph of democracy that in about 450 BC a new priestesshood of Athena of Victory (Nike) was created – by the men, admittedly – on expressly democratic lines. All Athenian women were deemed eligible for the post, without discrimination on grounds of birth or wealth or even capacity, and the selection was to be carried out by the maximally egalitarian procedure of the lottery.[38]

Another measure passed in the Assembly at about the same time affected even more directly and vitally the life-chances and social status of all Athenian women. In 451/0, on a motion proposed by Pericles from factional as well as statesmanlike motives, the Athenians voted a law providing that citizenship was henceforth to be based on double-descent; a (male, adult) citizen, in other words, would have to have been born of an Athenian mother as well as – what had hitherto been sufficient – an Athenian father. In the absence of birth certificates and blood tests, the sworn testimony of kin and friends was now required to prove against challenge not only that the father who put his son forward for acceptance by his fellow-demesmen was indeed his natural or adoptive father but also that his natural mother was of Athenian citizen status and, probably, that the son had been conceived or born in legitimate wedlock. Given that respectable Athenian

[37] Terminology of citizen women: Patterson (1986). Religion: see next paragraph. Assembly pay: see below, p. 33.

[38] Women and religion: Bruit (1992). Thesmophoria: Winkler (1990a) 188–209. Athena Nike: Fornara (1983) no. 93; cf. Jameson (1994).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

women were expected for ideological reasons to remain as invisible as was deemed compatible with the authentication of their male offspring's status, such proof was not always easily forthcoming.

Precisely what motives and aims lay behind this momentous new double-descent law is unclear, although several of its possible, likely or certain effects can be specified. By reducing the number of potential mothers of Athenian citizens – for example, it is likely to have made it more difficult at least for a man to pass off his son by a slave woman as his legitimate Athenian son – the law could perhaps have slowed the rate of growth of the citizen body. It will also have penalised Athenian aristocrats who had formerly been accustomed to contracting marriage alliances for dynastic and diplomatic reasons with Greek or foreign women from families of comparable social status in other cities or countries. (Ironically, had Pericles' law been in force in the sixth century, Cleisthenes, the founder of the democracy, and some other exceptional Athenians would have been disqualified from Athenian citizenship.) But the one unambiguous effect of its passage, as long as it was enforced, will have been to enhance the marriageability of Athenian-status women at the expense of the ever-increasing numbers of foreign-born women in Athens, both free and slave. For they and only they could confer the gift of citizenship, an increasingly precious commodity – especially for the poor – with the growth of democracy and the influx of imperial wealth. On the other hand, they could confer this gift only with the acquiescence of the male kinsman, father, husband, even adult son, in whose legal power they firmly remained, or were perhaps now even more firmly retained.[39]

It is unthinkable that so momentous a development should not have had an impact in the theatre, especially as Dionysus was a god whose rituals of worship and cultic attributes had such specifically feminine associations. But what exactly that impact was, and how we should assess its significance, are controversial issues. No less controversial is the debate as to whether Athenian women might watch, or rather be permitted or encouraged to watch, the plays themselves, which often allocated crucial dramatic roles to female characters. To be schematic, one line of modern criticism detects an increasingly sympathetic portrayal of women in tragedy, including the presentation of a specifically 'women's viewpoint' on both practical and civic ideals – roughly from the Clytemnestra, Niobe and daughters of Danaus of Aeschylus, through the Antigone, Procne and Deianeira of Sophocles, to the Medea, Melanippe, Creusa, Phaedra and Stheneboea

[39] Citizenship law: Patterson (1981); Boegehold (1994). Status of women in law: Just (1989) Foxhall in Foxhall & Lewis (1996) 133–152.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

of Euripides. (Lack of extant plays prevents our prolonging the series in detail into the fourth century.)

The contrary line of interpretation stresses that all performers in tragedy, not to mention the dramatists, were citizen males, and notes the almost formulaic consistency of plot-development, whereby it is women, whenever they are for any reason not adequately controlled by their relevant male relatives, who typically and predictably engender social and political dislocation, disharmony or destruction. Thus at the close of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, although this scene falls within the characteristically female sphere of mourning, the sisters Antigone and Ismene are presented as virtual faction-leaders. In Sophocles' *Antigone* (produced perhaps about the time that he served as one of the ten elected generals of the Athenian empire) the eponymous heroine is clearly on the side of the gods, but she is equally clearly a menace (in a different way from her uncle Creon) to the smooth running of the male-ordered city. In a more extreme variation on the theme of the danger of women and the paramount need to control them, Euripides' Hippolytus (like Aeschylus' Eteocles) bitterly laments the physical necessity of women for human reproduction, and seeks to live without them, yet in the end is compelled to learn by suffering that the force of Aphrodite, goddess of sex as well as sex goddess, cannot be denied. In the words of the first (not the extant) *Hippolytus*, 'those who exceed in shunning Kypris [Aphrodite] are as sick as those who exceed in hunting her'.[40]

Yet perhaps the most extreme instance of Athenian citizen males' would-be social control of women through dominant ideology is to be seen in their use of myth. According to the aboriginal Athenian charter-myth, the myth of autochthony, the founding mother of the Athenian citizen body was not an animate being, human or divine, but 'mother' Earth, the very soil of Attica. Human female reproduction was thereby finessed, or suppressed, in official civic ideology. The evidence we have would seem to indicate that in its most developed form the foundational myth of autochthony crystallised round about the middle of the fifth century – too close to the passage of the Periclean citizenship law for sheer or mere coincidence. Euripides pointedly explores this autochthony myth in *Ion*, but although here as elsewhere in his work Athens' most basic gender norms are seriously questioned, *Ion* does not convey the suggestion that the autochthony myth should be

[40] Femininity of Dionysus, and of tragedy: see Ch. 5 below. Women attending the theatre?: Goldhill (1994a); Podlecki (1990); also Ch. 3. Contrary readings of tragic women: des Bouvrie (1990); Easterling (1987b); Foley (1992); Henderson (1991); Katz (1994); Loraux (1987); Pomeroy (1975) 93–115; Rabinowicz (1992) and (1993); Zeitlin (1990). (First) *Hippolytus* quotation: F 428 Nauck.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

scrapped as so much masculinist bunkum and balderdash. What the Athenian men gave with one hand they appear to have taken away with the other.[41]

However, for all the social cohesion that the myth of autochthony and other applications of ideological cement may have engendered in the male citizens as distinct from or in opposition to their women, no amount of symbolic mythmaking could prevent a recrudescence of the class-based political *stasis* within the citizenry that had briefly afflicted Athens in the late 460s and early 450s and increasingly convulsed the entire Greek world during the course of the Peloponnesian War. Most of our surviving tragedies were composed during this war, by Sophocles and his younger contemporary Euripides (Aeschylus having died in Sicily in 456). I select just one play of each in order to illustrate the strains and tensions to which the Athenians were increasingly subjected and also the remarkable quality of the dramatists' reflection on and response to them: in short, the interplay between tragedy in the non-theatrical sense and tragic drama.

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* was probably performed around the time of the war's outbreak in *c.* 430 and set in the city of one of Athens' principal enemies, the Thebans, who indeed as allies of Sparta were responsible for initiating the hostilities. Of course the *Iliad* too begins with a plague, but that afflicted an army at war in some corner of a foreign field, whereas the plague in Sophocles' Thebes was an urban phenomenon, affecting a great city precisely as the Great Plague blighted Athens from 430 onwards. Of course, Sophocles' Thebes was not in any simple sense a mere surrogate or allegory of Athens, any more than Oedipus was of Pericles. All the same, it would have been a peculiarly obtuse Athenian spectator who was not sharply stabbed by a prick of transhistorical and cross-cultural recognition as he watched *Oedipus the King* unfold – or unravel. Were Athens and Pericles, he might well have mused, also riding for a fall, having misread the divine signals? It is not irrelevant that even Thucydides' ultra-rationalist Pericles is made to refer to the Plague as something 'heaven-sent' – beyond the power, or ken, of mere mortal men.[42]

Some fifteen years later, in spring 415, Euripides staged a Trojan War trilogy, including the extant *Trojan Women*. This was possibly written during and certainly performed immediately after the Athenians' massacre of the adult males and enslavement of the women and children of the small

[41] Autochthony myth: Loraux (1986) index s.v. and (1993) 37–71. In *Ion*: Loraux (1993) 147–236 ('dark face', 220–4); Zeitlin (1989). Crystallisation of the myth: Rosivach (1987).

[42] Spread of *stasis*: Thuc. 3.82.1. Soph. *O.T.*: Knox (1979) chs. 8–10; Segal (1993a). Tragic Thebes as 'anti-Athens': Zeitlin (1986) and (1993). Pericles on Plague as *daimonion*: Thuc. 2.64.2; cf. Cartledge (1993) 168.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Cycladic island-state of Melos (better, and more happily, known today under its Venetian name of Milo). Of course, as was noted in connection with Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, the epic cycle also was focused on the capture and sack of a city, with its attendant atrocities, but it was surely not only or even primarily of Homer's Troy that Euripides intended his audience to think, except perhaps to draw the contrast between little Greek Melos and mighty barbarian Troy. To convey the flavour of Euripides' almost recklessly daring démarche, and the depth of self-scrutiny to which he was inviting the audience to proceed, we might perhaps imagine a British playwright of known radical political persuasion composing a tragedy in response to the bombing of Baghdad during the Gulf War of 1991 and equating it by implication with the Nazi German air-raids on London during the Second World War. The processual dramatisation of Athenian political life could scarcely be taken further.[43]

Four years after the Melos massacre, during which time Athens suffered the comprehensive and largely self-inflicted defeat in Sicily remarked upon above, a group of extreme oligarchs led by Antiphon and supported somewhat naively by a large section of the economically and ideologically middling citizenry (including, perhaps, Sophocles and Euripides) succeeded in overthrowing the democracy in 411. A combination of internal squabbling among the oligarchs and consequent inefficiency in their conduct of the war, the unwavering loyalty of the fleet to the old regime, and a residual fondness among the middling citizens for democracy as the devil they knew soon brought about the full restoration of democratic government. But it proved an uneasy restoration, notably reflected on the tragic stage by Euripides' *Orestes* (408), and defeat in the Peloponnesian War was merely postponed not avoided. The defeat of 404 brought with it a second abrogation of democratic government, directly imposed this time by the Spartan victors. The very narrow and extremist oligarchy behaved so savagely, however, that it earned itself the sobriquet of the 'Thirty Tyrants'. Even the Spartans found it politic to abandon their puppets and permit the restoration of democracy – at their ultimate discretion – in 403. Retrospectively, the civil year 404/3 was treated as a null year of 'anarchy' in the Athenian calendar, and the new era of restored democracy was signalled both by immediate celebrations of reconciliation and by the establishment for the future of a revised law-code publicly inscribed on marble walls within the official residence of the Basileus or 'King' Archon.[44]

The new code naturally embraced the Athenian religious calendar, within

[43] Eur. *Tro.*: Croally (1994).

[44] Antiphon: above, n. 18. Eur. *Orestes*: Hall (1993b). Thirty Tyrants: Krentz (1982). Restored democracy celebration: Strauss (1985). Law-code: Hansen (1991) 162–5.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

which the Dionysia and Lenaea play-festivals retained their honoured places. Thus Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, was first produced posthumously (Sophocles had died in 406/5) by his grandson in 402/1, a critical moment in the process of post-war reconstruction. This is also probably our latest surviving whole tragedy (unless *Rhesus* is post-400; cf. Ch. 9, p. 211 below), but that chronological datum must not be allowed to obscure the continued, indeed in some senses augmented, vitality of tragedy during what is to us, but not of course the Athenians, the fourth century BC. Although fourth-century Athenians came to judge Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the nonpareils of the genre, and regularly honoured their plays with revivals, tragedy itself was not merely a fifth-century phenomenon, the product of a short-lived golden age. If not attaining the quality and stature of the fifth-century 'classics', original tragedies nevertheless continued to be written and produced and competed with in large numbers throughout the remaining life of the democracy – and beyond it. Indeed, in so far as the genius of fourth-century playwrights was palpably humbler than that of the fifth-century holy trinity, their works perhaps mirrored or reflected the audience's concerns even more faithfully.[45]

The restored and restabilised post-403 democracy lasted until its suppression by Macedon in 322. It was possibly less ideologically and institutionally radical than its predecessor, though it was if anything even more participatory (the introduction of pay for Assembly attendance in *c.* 400 enabled a higher proportion of citizens to attend regularly, for example), and Aristotle properly classified it as belonging to the 'ultimate' or most extreme of the several types of Greek democracy known to him in the third quarter of the fourth century. Certainly it had to be more self-consciously pragmatic, because with the loss of power and income from an overseas empire economic problems bulked larger even than heretofore. The importation of wheat to Athens from the Ukraine and Crimea, for example, could no longer be guaranteed by Athenian warfleets, nor could the grain be purchased at source by Athens-based traders at the previous favourably discounted prices. It was symptomatic that the grain-supply became a staple item on the agenda of the 'principal' Assembly meeting of each month. In the fourth century, too, financial acumen became as important a qualification for political leadership as diplomatic or military skills, if not more so. Hence the rise to prominence of a 'technocrat' such as Lycurgus in the 330s. But hence, also, the ever more intense debate about the proper use of the

[45] Soph. O.C.: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988) 329–59. Fourth-century tragedy: Xanthakis-Karamanos (1980); Easterling (1993a).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

Theoric or Festival Fund mentioned above, a sure sign of the continued significance of the theatre to the functioning of democratic politics in the widest sense.[46]

In the good old days, lamented the crypto-oligarchic pamphleteer Isocrates, 'many of the common people never visited Athens even for festivals' – allegedly. By implication, at the time of Isocrates' writing (the 350s) they regularly poured in from the Attic countryside to take their perhaps tribally apportioned seats alongside their urban brethren in the theatre of Dionysus. There were of course few other mass entertainment media at Athens, if theatre-going within the context of a religious festival may be so described. But money too was tighter, and the prospect of state-subsidised entertainment (and instruction) coupled with a beef supper liberally lubricated by Dionysus' special juice might have been a very attractive proposition indeed. Nor were the celebrations conspicuously less lavish in the fourth century than in the more opulent fifth. In 333/2, for instance, possibly as many as 240 bulls were sacrificed in the central ritual of that year's Great Dionysia, and that was despite – or maybe as partial compensation for – the economic, military and political crisis that had beset Athens since her catastrophic defeat by Philip of Macedon at Chaeronea in Boeotia in 338, which threatened to deprive her of her independent existence as well as her democracy and grain-supply.

So lavish a supply of sacrificial animals depended on the continued willingness of the wealthy to act as civic benefactors, but not all of these were democratically minded and motivated, or not at least to the same extent as Demosthenes, the People's champion and leader of the anti-Macedonian resistance. Demosthenes knew exactly what he was doing when he made a litigating client claim that his opponent was spending money hand over fist like a *chorēgos*. For Demosthenes himself had been involved in a notorious lawsuit with Meidias, a rival *chorēgos* (in the men's tribal dithyramb), who he claimed had openly struck him actually within the theatre of Dionysus. His extant prosecution speech, even if not delivered as such, is a compendious vade-mecum of the democratic rhetoric of theatricality, and of the theatricality of fourth-century democratic rhetoric. In Aeschines, the actor turned politician, Demosthenes found an entirely suitable opponent, but when Athens proved to be insufficiently big for the two of them, it was Aeschines who, having gambled and lost all on a political prosecution of 330, was forced to make a hasty and final exit, in accordance with the usual rules of Greek zero-sum competition.[47]

[46] Fourth-century democracy: Hansen (1987) and (1991). Grain-supply: ?Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 43.4; cf. Garnsey (1988) Part III. Theoric Fund: above, n. 11.

[47] Isocrates quotation: 7 (*Areop.*).52. Dionysia of 333/2: Parke (1977) 127; but see Jameson

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006

By then, though, Lycurgus not Demosthenes was Athens' number one man, credited with turning around Athens' finances and fortunes alike. Two of his pet projects of public expenditure, as we have already noted, concerned the tragic theatre directly: the commissioning of authoritative copies for the state archives of the still extant plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; and the construction of the first all-stone theatre of Dionysus, ancestor of the Roman remodelling visible to visitors today. The former measure is testimony both to the establishment of a fixed repertoire of 'classics' and to the extent to which actors – an increasingly mobile, cosmopolitan and perhaps professionally jealous crew – had been taking liberties with their scripts. Even more significantly, perhaps, it breathes the spirit of an incipient movement of scholarship that was soon to receive physical embodiment in the Museum and Library established by the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt at Alexandria, their great Hellenistic capital founded by and named after Alexander the Great.[48]

The building of a monumental theatre in stone bespeaks a determined conviction of the likely central importance of drama to Athens (as to the rest of Greece) for the foreseeable future. That future, however, was not destined to be a democratic one. In 322, the year after Alexander's death in Babylon, the new Macedonian overlord of Greece forcibly replaced Athens' existing constitution with an oligarchy, and notwithstanding increasingly desperate attempts to restore it democracy remained for ever after but a dream of past glories. Spatially, the locus of formal political decision-making shifted symbolically from the Pnyx to the theatre of Dionysus, since Athens like any other Hellenistic Greek polis was able to muster only the show rather than the substance of politics. So far as theatre in the narrower sense was concerned, the most influential form of Athenian drama now went under the sign of the muse of (situation) comedy. Tragedy – though by no means a dead art form – proved less capable of evolution or mutation outside a democratic environment. So when the conquering Romans introduced the arts of captive Greece to Latium, it was not Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides who provided the chief source of popular dramatic inspiration (though political tragedy modelled on Euripides was not unknown in Rome), but Menander. *Sic transit gloria mundi tragici*?[49]

(1994) 316 n. 13. Demosthenes' *chorēgos* image: 40.51. Demosthenes as *chorēgos* (*Against Meidias*): Wilson (1991). Aeschines: Lane Fox (1994).

[48] Lycurgus: above, n. 19. Actors' mobility: Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 279. Ptolemaic scholarship: Fraser (1972).

[49] Destruction of democracy in Athens (and Greece): Ste Croix (1981) 300–15. Menander: Green & Handley (1995) ch. 7.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. University of Warwick, on 10 Nov 2020 at 12:45:47, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521412455.001
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2006