

Theatre and Ritual

Humanities 110

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I. Describing the City Dionysia

II. Ritual, Religion, Politics

III. The *Oresteia* and Ritual

Terms:

cavea (auditorium)

skene (temporary tent-like structure erected for ritual)

trittys (third)

stasis (faction, discord)

dithyramb (a choral hymn)

ephebe (adolescent male)

phallophoric (phallus bearing)

xenismos (reception) [note the root *xenos* -- meaning "guest" or "foreigner"]

kanephoroi (basket-carriers)

tragos (goat)

tragodos (singer at the sacrifice of a billy goat, or for the prize of a billy goat)

choregos (wealthy citizen who paid for a day of dithyramb or tragedy)

terminus ante quem (date before which a document must have been written)

Quotations:

1) "The last kind of democracy, because all the population share in the government, it is not within the power of every state to endure, and it is not easy for it to persist if it is not well constituted in its laws and customs With a view to setting up this kind of democracy and making the people powerful their leaders usually acquire as many supporters as possible and admit to citizenship not only the legitimate children of citizens but also the base-born and those of citizen-birth on one side, I mean those whose father or mother is a citizen; for all this element is specially congenial to a democracy of this sort. Popular leaders therefore regularly introduce such institutions. . . . A democracy of this kind will also find useful such institutions as were employed by Cleisthenes at Athens when he wished to increase the power of the democracy . . . ; different tribes and brotherhoods must be created outnumbering the old ones, and the celebrations of private religious rites must be grouped together into a small number of public celebrations, and every device must be employed to make all the people as much as possible intermingled with one another, and to break up the previously existing groups of associates." Aristotle, *Politics* 6. 1319b

2) "The Acropolis is a defensible limestone mass rising out of the Attic plain and fixing the sweep of view which is defined by the bounding mountains and islands. It is a solid object set in an imperial bowl." --Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods : Greek Sacred Architecture*.

3) "We can describe the fifth-century theater of Dionysus at Athens as a spare architectural frame set in a natural landscape, in contrast to the enclosed buildings we usually think of as theaters. This expansive outdoor space gathered a large and diverse audience. Theatergoers arrived by foot from the city, via animal cart from the environs of sea from elsewhere in Greece. They made their way to the precinct of Dionysus Eleuthereus, past the god's altar and temple, then through the *eisodoi* (the same side entrances used by the performers), across the hard earth of the orchestra, and finally up the south slope of the Acropolis to the seating area (*cavea*), which included the bare ground of the hillside.

From their different vantage points, those in the audience looked down over the paths they had just traveled. They could see the temple and sanctuaries, the city walls, and (from east to west) the Hippades, Diomeian, Itonian,

Halade, and South gates (figure 2). Within the walls were visible (from various points in the *cavea*) the sanctuary of Olympian Zeus, including the abandoned but imposing temple started by the Pisistratids; the temple of Apollo Pythios, called the Pythion; the temple of Apollo Delphinios and the nearby Palladion (the wooden statue of Athena purportedly captured at Troy), with the adjoining areas where the eponymous homicide courts (the Delphinion and Palladion) met; the sanctuary of Cronos and Rhea; the shrine to Ge; a shrine called the Neleion, dedicated to Kodros, Neleus, and Basile; the sanctuary of the Nymphs, where brides-to-be dedicated votives before their wedding; possibly a shrine dedicated to Theseus, Hippolytus, and Aphrodite; and many private houses of the southern city, which Thucydides (2.15.3) considered to be the oldest part of non-Acropolis Athens.

Those sitting higher up in the theater audience could gaze outside the walls. They could see the Illissos valley and the extension of the city to the south, including the sanctuary and gymnasium of Kynosarges, the sanctuary of Zeus Meilichios in Agrai, and the Callirrhoe spring, which provided water for the nuptial baths that a bride and groom took (separately) as part of their wedding ritual; to the east they caught the slopes of Mount Hymettos, famous for its thyme (an Athenian export), honey, and the marble quarries that provided much of the building material for Athens' impressive public monuments; closer in they could see the Ardettos hill, the sanctuary of Artemis Agrotera (the site of annual sacrifices commemorating the victory over the Persians at Marathon) and the edges of the Lykeion, the exercise ground and place of muster for the Athenian hoplites and cavalry; to the south and west, the bay of Phaleron (hidden by the hill of the Nymphs and of the Muses), out in the direction of the city's port, Piraeus; further beyond, the Saronic Gulf and the peak of Prophitis Ilias, the site of the shrine of Zeus Panhellenios, on the island of Aegina where many Athenians had sheltered when the Persians occupied and burned their city in 480. Behind and above them loomed the Acropolis (the particular target of the Persians), packed with various cult sites, most of them dedicated to the goddess Athena. The audience gazed up at the sky, down at the beaten earth of the orchestra, out over the city, its plains, hills, and out toward the sea. The spectators also looked at one another because the slope where they sat and the common light of the sun forced them to survey themselves even as they watched the performances." -- Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space*, 35-36

4) "If it is correct that the disease that struck the Antheians' sexual organs was a permanent erection, in other words, excessive, and so bad, sexuality, one way this could be seen is that the wrath of Dionysos had turned the Athenian men into metaphorical *tragoi*. And the sacrifice of a *tragos* at the *xenismos* of Dionysos involved, among other things, the killing of this *tragos* part of themselves, which was correlative with the end of their disease, brought about by this very act of the reception of Dionysos and the establishment of his cult." Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*, 117.

5) "Cassandra compares the *skênê* doors to the gates of Hades, approaches the altar meekly like a sacrificial ox, and reels back from the smell of death. Such images are rooted in physical actuality, for the death behind the *skênê* was real, the victim had to acquiesce in death to spare the guilt of his killer, and the smell of the dead animals must have lingered during the days of tragic performance. David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens : Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*, 59.

6) "The mythical themes of epic and tragedy originate in pre-polis society. And yet we have seen that the Homeric epics are, in the final form in which we have them, a product of the polis, expressing the needs of the polis in their treatment of the crisis of reciprocity and of the integrative power of ritual. Tragedy, a product of the polis at a later stage of its development, takes the royal individuals of myth, calls them tyrannoi and concentrates on stories in which their unlimited desire gives rise not just to reciprocal violence but also to killing of kin, attacks on religion, of ritual, and the delusion that results in action being reversed into the opposite of its intention (Aristotelian *peripeteia*). The tension between the danger of such unconstrained action and the communality expressed in cult, a tension characteristic of the polis, is generally resolved in tragedy by a typical pattern, in which the self-destruction of the tyrannical family (involving perversion of ritual) gives rise, at the end of the tragedy (or tragic trilogy), to the foundation of civic cult. In the following chapters we shall see that the typicality of this tragic pattern arises from the complex of myth and ritual associated with the cult within which tragedy came into being, the cult of Dionysos." Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual : Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*, 233-34.

7) "We may choose to regard the opulent, choregically financed, tragic performances as representing the elite's way of dramatizing their own continuing role of leadership, risk, and self-sacrifice, while disguising it safely behind the masked and costumed royal figures of the heroic past. Or, from a different perspective, we may prefer to see the

dēmos as licensing their ‘bright potentates’ (i.e., the wealthy and educated poets, producers, and musicians) to stage these stories of past-in-present, stories that constantly erupt with out-of-control tyrants and doomed dynastic families, who risk all, and often lose all, while their anonymous community recovers and even prospers at the end, for the whole citizen body to watch and judge--and walk away unscathed, perhaps even morally strengthened and reassured. On either scenario, the mass of Athenians can simultaneously tut-tut to themselves gnomically about the dangers of aristocratic excess, and also, if they wish and need, reinforce their continuing and deep-seated faith in the cultural and political value of those great families. Each spring, within this safe theatrical space, the brilliant dynasts show themselves to be performing a supremely dangerous, delicate, and at times odious--but nonetheless vital and treasured--combination of roles for their less ‘fortunate’ fellow-citizens. The calibration of these roles requires and deserves the finest of tuning from one performance to another, for the lifestyles of the rich and famous always command mixed awe and suspicion from the public at large. But in the *Oresteia* at least, the roles are perfectly calibrated, and are shown finally to justify themselves in the grandest, yet safest, manner possible.” --Mark Griffith, "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*." *Classical Antiquity*. 14:1 (1995): 129.

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