

Chapter 1

Drama and the city of Athens

To exist outside a *polis* is to be either greater or less than human.
 Aristotle

All our surviving tragedies were written for and performed first in one place, Athens, in the fifth century B.C. To understand tragedy, something of its cultural and historical frame must be appreciated. In this chapter, I consider four fundamental contexts for the genre of tragedy.

1 *The context of the polis*

Let us start, then, with a necessary word of Greek: *polis* (plural *poleis*). I must transliterate this because no translation – certainly not the usual translations ‘city’ or ‘city-state’ – captures the complex range of political, spatial, religious, historical and social ideas evoked by the Greek term. That I just used the modern term ‘political’, which is derived from the Greek term ‘things to do with the *polis*’, shows the problem neatly. For many modern readers, I expect, the term ‘political’ will imply a more or less narrow concern with government and institutions and ideological programmes – as in ‘keep politics out of sport’. The *polis* in Greece, however, is the very condition of human existence (as the epigraph to this chapter claims) and ‘things to do with the *polis*’ – the political – embrace all aspects of a citizen’s life. (Thus ‘the personal is political’ could have no purchase as a slogan in the fifth century, any more than could the claim that athletic achievement was not integrally linked to the standing of the citizen and his *polis*.) As Aristotle famously writes, ‘Man is a political animal’ – by which he means ‘man necessarily and naturally lives in a *polis*’. Greek tragedy is both part of this life of the *polis* and repeatedly reflects on its audience’s existence as ‘political animals’. So it is first the crucial frame of the *polis* that I want to discuss.

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My discussion will focus inevitably on Athens, in some ways a highly atypical *polis*, but I shall try in this first section of the chapter to show some ways in which Athens exemplifies certain common fifth-century ideas of the *polis*. I will begin, however, with some very general remarks about the fifth century as a specific period in the history of the *polis*.

Now the fifth century throughout Greece was a period of rapid and intense political change. The many different and largely autonomous communities that had grown up through the previous centuries faced similar pressures on three fronts. First, for a nexus of economic and social reasons, many *poleis* were racked by internal tensions particularly between a wealthy land-owning élite and the wider population. Ancient commentators describe a series of violent shifts of constitution – between oligarchy (rule by a few), tyranny (rule by one man) and democracy (rule by the many). So towards the end of the sixth century Athens was ruled by Peisistratus, a tyrant, who was succeeded by his son Hippias, but in 507, after many years of division, the reforms of Cleisthenes instituted the first democratic system, which provided Athens with its method of government for most of the fifth century and which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, is not merely the violent political upheavals of this period, but the fact that they were accompanied by an intense, public and sophisticated debate about the processes and principles of change as they were taking place. This competitive self-scrutiny and self-criticism has been convincingly seen as a determining factor in what is known as the fifth-century enlightenment – that extraordinary burgeoning of arts, science, medicine and philosophy in the fifth century, centred on Athens (Lloyd 1987). Indeed, the institution of tragedy, and the *Oresteia* in particular, as we will see, can be viewed first as part of this continuing public debate on internal political developments.

The second major pressure on the *polis* comes from the East. From the beginning of the fifth century, Greek cities, particularly at first the Ionian cities of Asia Minor, were locked in a struggle with the Persian empire. Twice full-scale invasions of Greece were beaten off, notably at Marathon in 490, where the Athenians played a leading role and Aeschylus himself fought; and in 480/479, in a series of battles of which the sea battle at Salamis and the land battle at Plataia

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proved decisive. Aeschylus may have fought at Salamis too, and the *Persians*, his first surviving tragedy, dramatizes the expedition and the battle at sea from the point of view of the defeated Persians. The wars against Persia brought a heightened – and much debated – sense of ‘Greekness’ (as opposed to ‘the barbarians’) and led to active political debates on foreign policy and freedom. The *Oresteia*, like many tragedies, has as its background the war of the Greeks against the Trojans (the ‘barbarian’ East) and ends with the *polis* of Athens being exhorted to victory in conflicts away from Athens itself. Here, too, then, tragedy takes place against the significant political backdrop of major conflict.

The third pressure – partly a result of the defeat of Persia – was the rise and conflict of Athenian and Spartan imperialism in the Greek world. Themistocles had persuaded the Athenians to invest the income from the newly discovered silver mines at Laureion in a huge fleet (instrumental in the victory at Salamis). After the threat from Persia diminished, Athens was a driving force in the formation of the ‘Delian League’, a group of allies formed for mutual defence and reparations against Persia. Athens rapidly assumed hegemony, and, in 454, four years after the *Oresteia*, transferred the treasury of the League from the island of Delos to the Acropolis in Athens. Here Pericles persuaded the Assembly to use the funds both to adorn Athens – the Parthenon is the most famous result of this programme – and, more importantly, to finance an increasingly imperialist campaign throughout the Mediterranean (as ‘allies’ became more and more tribute states under Athens’ domination). This brought Athens into conflict with Sparta and throughout the latter part of the fifth century Athens and Sparta were in conflict – the Peloponnesian War. Our surviving tragedies are co-extensive with the spread – and fall – of the Athenian empire, which had an effect throughout the Greek world.

Much of the fifth century, then, was dominated by internal division and external conflict both between *poleis* and between Greece and her neighbours. The internal strife of the *polis*, however, focused not merely on who should hold the offices of government but also on the category of ‘citizen’ (*polites*). Citizenship implies belonging, being an insider, and there was an acute difference in privilege, status and position between citizens and non-citizens. Legal definitions of

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citizenship were increasingly debated – we know of several fourth-century law-cases contesting the issue from Athens – but being a citizen also implied a much wider set of ideas, all of which start from a criterion of being male, adult and Greek. (As Socrates is said to have pronounced, with a characteristically Greek sense of polarity, ‘I thank god I was born a human and not an animal, a man and not a woman, a Greek and not a barbarian.’) So, in Athens, only adult males could be citizens (women were not even known as ‘Athenians’ but as ‘women of Attica’); and Pericles in 451 instigated a law which made it a requirement for citizenship that one’s father should be a citizen and one’s mother the daughter of a citizen. This not only restricted eligibility for citizenship drastically, but also effectively outlawed marriage between people of different *poleis* (thus destroying the traditional links by marriage between aristocratic families across Greece). The distinction between citizen and non-citizen was especially important in Athens, where, as the major commercial and cultural centre of Greece, there was an exceptionally large population of resident aliens (‘metics’) as well as slaves.

Citizenship implied first and foremost a duty and obligation to the *polis*. That a man should act to benefit his *polis* and that a *polis* benefited from a man’s individual success are repeatedly asserted ideals. That a man should be prepared to fight and die for his *polis* is a given. That the community of the *polis* is the necessary foundation for religious, commercial and social life is largely taken for granted. Indeed, this ideology of *commitment to the polis* is so pervasive and strong that it remains a standard explanation of behaviour even (or especially) throughout the rebellions and civil discord of the fifth century. To be a citizen (*polites*), then, is to be in all senses a man of the *polis*.

In the light of this integral connection of citizenship, birth and the city, it is not surprising that there is a close connection between the *polis* and its land (Osborne). Even Athens, one of the largest communities, remained primarily an agricultural community where even the furthest territory was within at least an extended walking distance of the urban centre (approximately 70 kilometres). The *polis* often owned central areas, particularly of religious or military significance, and almost no property market developed in Greece. To move to another city thus meant either becoming a resident alien

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of greatly restricted rights or being forced into exile. Being a citizen implied an integral relation with the land of the *polis* – the fatherland.

Much religious life was focused on the *polis* too, with its temples, communal sacrifices and its festivals (Athens claimed it had more festivals than any other *polis*) (Easterling and Muir). The architecture, the religious ceremonies, the myths not only helped form the community of the *polis* as a community through shared activities and space, but also reflected and helped transmit and reinforce communal values (Vernant 1980; Gordon; Vernant 1983; Vidal-Naquet). It is not by chance, for example, that the Parthenon represents in its sculptures the community of Athens in worship and juxtaposes that image to two mythological subjects. First, the Amazons – wild women – being defeated in battle by Theseus, the king of Athens, who first organized Athens as a *polis*; and secondly, centaurs – monstrous half-men, half-beasts – in conflict with the civilized, human Lapiths. The civilized world of Athens and its values are surrounded, framed and defined by the defeat of figures who represent different forms of wildness, different forms of transgression (Tyrrell). As the Amazons became increasingly associated (particularly in such iconography) with the barbarian East, the representations of the victory of civilized Athens further enforce the significant connections between religious and political aspects of the *polis*.

So, too, being a citizen implied a (shared) history of the *polis*. For the Athenians, the defeat of the Persians at Marathon rapidly became a story of self-definition where the few, hardy, well-trained, disciplined Greeks defeated the soft, undisciplined, wealthy multitudes of the East. So, too, the foundation of a city is telling in the expression of citizenship: Athenians recounted how the first inhabitants of Attica sprang from the soil itself. Not only were women thus bypassed in a myth of origin – and women, as we have seen, could not be citizens in Athens – but also the integral connection of citizen to the land of the *polis* here receives a ‘charter myth’, which tells how the citizen is in all senses ‘of the land’. The community of citizens defines itself partly through a shared myth of the past of the *polis*.

The *polis* inevitably provides the focus of social life also. The market place – *agorá* – is the central site of exchange – of goods, money,

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gossip, religion. It is a place where times of leisure for the adult male could regularly be spent. The gymnasium became a potent symbol of Greek culture for other cultures around the Mediterranean: it is where the citizens met to exercise naked (a thoroughly unoriental notion), to compete (in status, not merely in sport) and to form alliances – social and erotic. It is another public space of the *polis*. The sense of community and involvement implied by my phrase ‘commitment to the *polis*’ spreads throughout the fabric of fifth-century society.

To sum up so far, for the fifth-century Greek it was generally speaking an accepted principle that ‘the good life was possible only in a *polis*, that the good man was more or less synonymous with the good citizen, that slaves, women and barbarians were inferior by nature and so excluded from all discussion’ (Finley). Yet one qualification is immediately necessary, and to make it I need to add another Greek word to the discussion, namely, *oikos*. The *oikos*, which is often translated ‘household’, implies the physical house, the idea of home, the household members (alive and dead, slave and free); it indicates land, crops, chattels. A repeatedly expressed ideal of the *oikos* is its continuity: economic continuity in financial security; generational continuity in the production of legitimate sons; spatial continuity in that it exists across time in one place (hence the lack of a property market that I mentioned earlier). This ideal of the continuity of the *oikos* is one of the most lasting and binding norms of Greek cultural life. The *oikos* is the site of the private life of the citizen, and, as we will see, the more the ideology of the commitment of the citizen to the *polis* develops, particularly in the radical democracy of Athens, the more the ideals of the *polis* and the ideals of the *oikos* can be perceived to be in conflict. The *Oresteia* which starts in the home of one family and moves to the law-court of the city traverses the tensions produced by these two sites of authority in fifth-century culture, the *oikos* and the *polis*.

It will be evident that in my discussion so far I have followed in broad outline the modern categories that I mentioned in my opening paragraph – political, spatial, religious, historical, social. In part, my aim has been to show how what might appear to be natural modern distinctions inevitably overlap and interrelate in the idea of the *polis*. So, for example, the myth of birth from the soil that I

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mentioned constructs a narrative that bears on the religious sense of the city, its history, its sense of place, its sense of citizenship and the social implications of such a narrative of power and gender. It is – to put it more neatly – a tale of and for the *polis*.

2 *The context of democracy*

Athens, however, was no ordinary *polis*. Not only was it particularly large in population, territory and ambition, but also its radical democracy affected all aspects of its culture throughout the fifth century, and it is now to the specific context of democracy that I wish to turn.

This is not the place for a full history of democratic reform or for a full description of the institutions of democracy. Accounts are readily available for each period of Athenian history (Forrest; Manville; Sinclair; Ober; Hansen). But I will begin with some brief comments on the development and organization of Athenian democracy before turning to the way democracy and tragedy interrelate.

Although democracy emerged slowly, painfully and with many changes of policy and institution, the reforms of Cleisthenes constitute a major turning point. It is difficult to know precisely the range of local institutions – e.g. villages, kinship groups, religious organizations – that Cleisthenes faced, but what is clear is that he completely reorganized the sociopolitical structure of Attica. First he drew up boundaries for and organized citizens' affiliations to demes (139 or 140 of them, later rising to 174). Demes were local organizations, based on territorial and thus inevitably also on kinship ties. Enrolment on the register of the deme became a necessary criterion for citizenship. Local politics and other aspects of cultural life were organized through the demes. Indeed, from this time onwards, the name of a citizen's deme became the standard way of referring to a man, along with his father's name. (So, for example, Aeschylus' full name was *Aiskhulos Euphorionos Eleusinius*, 'Aeschylus, son of Euphorion, of the deme Eleusis'.) The deme thus rapidly became and remained a fundamental unit of the social fabric of Athens.

Cleisthenes also established ten tribes. Each deme was assigned to a tribe; and each tribe was deliberately constructed to be roughly

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equal in size and to have demes from three different areas of Attica, the city itself, the sea-board and the inland territories. The tribes were thus designed to widen affiliation and to reduce conflict between different areas of the territory of Attica.

The main decision-making and legislative body was the Assembly, which every citizen had the right to attend. It voted on all policies (one citizen, one vote) after a debate. Each debate was introduced by the famous formula 'Who wishes to speak?', a formulation which implied that every citizen, regardless of wealth, birth or position had an equal right to address the people – a very cornerstone of democratic principle (even if in practice some citizens proved more equal than others . . .). The business of the Assembly was prepared by a Council of 500 citizens over the age of thirty who were elected each year, as were most officials in Athens, by lot. The position was not renewable (it could only be held twice and not in consecutive years); there was a compulsory geographical spread of councillors; all officials had to present full accounts at the end of their year of office. The Council was also charged with putting into action the will of the Assembly, and the balance between the executive Council and policy-making Assembly was essential to the practice of democracy.

The institutions of law are also fundamental to democracy. From the time of Ephialtes' reforms in 462, most court cases in what was a highly litigious society were held before popular courts where jurors were chosen by lot from a roster of 6,000 volunteers and paid by the state. Equality of all citizens before the law and the binding authority of the laws of the city were central tenets of democratic ideology. This ideal is enacted most famously by Socrates who, when convicted, elected to stay in prison and be executed rather than flee to exile and safety, but thus transgress the laws' authority. Democracy, with its publicized laws, enacted by consent in public by the public, significantly depicted itself as the polar opposite of tyranny, the unaccountable rule by force of one man. Democracy and the openness of the legal process were thus constructed as mutually implicative and mutually authorizing.

Although one should not underestimate the difficulty poorer citizens or those from outlying territory would have faced in taking full part in the apparatus of government, considerable participation of an extended range of citizens was necessary for the running of the

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polis (Sinclair; Hansen; Ober). Not only could such pressing matters as the declaration of war be discussed by the prospective soldiers and sailors; but also within a single decade, something between a quarter and a third of citizens could reasonably expect to have served on the Council, the executive body of government. With its lack of bureaucracy and hierarchy of office, its selection of officials by lot, and with its immediate involvement in the maintenance and application of law, this direct democracy is far removed from modern Western representative government. The ‘commitment to the *polis*’ that I described as a basic fifth-century ideological force finds its institutional pinnacle in Athenian democracy.

I mentioned above the standard assumption that a citizen should be prepared to fight and die for the *polis* (as indeed Aeschylus fought at Marathon and perhaps Salamis). It must never be forgotten to what degree Athens is a warrior society and how deeply militarism is linked to democracy throughout the fifth century. Athens had a largely citizen militia – to be a soldier or sailor for most of the century one had to be a citizen; to be a citizen carried an expectation of military activity for the *polis*. I have pointed out that a declaration of war was debated in the Assembly by the prospective soldiers: what is striking is that the Assembly voted themselves into war nearly every year of the fifth century and no two years in succession passed without a campaign. ‘War is to a man what marriage is to a woman’, writes Vernant of fifth-century Athens – by which he means war provides the institution through which a man becomes fully a man, standing in the battle-line with his fellow citizens (as marriage and childbirth are necessary criteria for the title ‘woman’). In democratic Athens, warfare is another integral element of what it means to be a *polites*, a man of the *polis*.

It is particularly fascinating, then, to see how the ‘commitment to the *polis*’ combines with the obligations of a direct democratic system and with Athenian militarism to produce a collective military ideology that pervades the institutions, language and activities of Athenian democracy. One institution shows this with especial force, namely the collective burial of the war dead (Loraux). Burial in Greek society was traditionally a family affair. But in Athens from at least around the 470s those who had died fighting for the city received a collective burial, carried to the grave, tribe by tribe, on wagons.

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The markers raised over the graves listed the bare names of those who had fallen and did not give the father's name or deme name, those usual markers of identification. The dead lay just as Athenian citizens. The whole population was allowed to attend the burial, and an orator chosen by the city addressed the people.

The most famous surviving example of such a Funeral Oration is Pericles' Funeral Speech as represented in the work of the historian Thucydides (II.35–46), and it is a speech that has been repeatedly used to demonstrate the public projection of the ideals of democratic ideology. Certainly when Pericles says of Athenian citizens that 'all of us are fit to judge . . . each of us is willing to fight and die', he resoundingly enforces the democratic rallying cries of Assembly, law-court, navy and army that I have been discussing. So too he proclaims that 'We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority and we obey the laws themselves' and that 'when it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law', just as 'no-one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty'. Indeed, the requirement of participation is such that 'we do not say that a man who takes no interest in the affairs of the *polis* minds his own business; we say he has no business here at all'. Pericles' speech thus praises the Athenian system as 'an education for all Greece', and goes on to contrast it at length with that of their enemies the Spartans. In Pericles' whole speech, however, no individual is mentioned; no individual feat of valour singled out. The speech praises the whole city as a collective, engaged in a collective enterprise: 'this, then, is the kind of city for which these men, who could not bear the thought of losing her, nobly fought and nobly died. It is only natural that everyone of us who survives them should be willing to undergo hardships in her service.' Both the institution of the collective burial of those who died fighting for the *polis* and the speech celebrating their burial thus project and promote the collective ideals of democratic Athens.

It is in Athenian democracy alone that tragedy develops in the fifth century. In the next section of this chapter I will look at ways in which the tragic festival is particularly related to democracy. But by way of conclusion for this section, I want briefly to look at one way in which the *Oresteia* is linked very closely to the history and practice