

AESCHYLUS

# The Oresteia

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## 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.

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

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

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



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,

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

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

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

*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.

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

of democracy. Four years before the first production of the *Oresteia*, a man named Ephialtes was the figurehead of a major reform of the democratic legal system. The Areopagus was an important court that was involved in many political issues, but its members were chosen only from those who had held the office of archon (which barred it to the lowest echelons of society). Although the archons were by now selected by lot, the Areopagus remained a bastion, or at least symbol, of traditional authority. Ephialtes succeeded in having all the powers of the Areopagus removed and devolved to the popular courts and to the Council, save the right to judge murder trials and certain religious crimes (such as damage to the sacred olive stumps). This change took place under the slogan of a return to the Areopagus' original and proper function. The effect of the reform was to decrease radically the power of the aristocrats and to increase the authority and jurisdiction of the popular courts. Ephialtes was assassinated shortly afterwards. (In return, Cimon, another leading political figure who had been to the fore in fighting the Persians, but who was a conservative in domestic politics, was exiled in the same year of turbulent political activity.) In the *Eumenides*, the third play of the *Oresteia*, Athene is depicted establishing the Areopagus – we see staged its 'charter myth' – and this court then tries Orestes for the murder of his mother. It is important that the *Oresteia* is the only surviving tragedy to have a scene thus set in the heart of Athens itself (albeit in the distant past). Athene makes a long speech about the Areopagus and its functions. Although critics have passionately disagreed about what this scene may indicate about Aeschylus' own political views, as we will see in section 15 of this book, one thing is clear. This scene of the play addresses in a direct way a central and highly controversial political event of the day, one fundamental to the organization of power within the *polis*. The *Oresteia*, then, is expressly engaging with the development of democracy in Athens, as it is directed towards the audience of the *polis* in the theatre.

### 3 *The context of the festival*

How does tragedy as a genre and the festival in which tragedy was performed relate to democracy? Is there a necessary link between democracy and tragedy?

The *Oresteia* was performed in a festival called the Great or City Dionysia. Although there was another less important festival, the Lenaia, at which drama was also performed from 440 B.C. in the city of Athens, and as the century advanced, performances of tragedy in particular spread further afield in Greece, it is primarily the Great Dionysia that provides the festival context for tragedy in Aeschylus' lifetime.

Let me begin with a brief description of the organization of the occasion itself. The chief official for the festival was the so-called Eponymous Archon (one of ten archons, or magistrates, appointed each year in fine democratic fashion by lot, one from each tribe from a list of five hundred candidates supplied by the demes). One of his first jobs on appointment was to select three poets to produce tragedies (and from 486, when comedy was introduced into the Great Dionysia, five comic playwrights). The playwrights were, to use the Greek phrase, 'granted a chorus'. We know nothing of the criteria used for choosing the poets. Then the Eponymous Archon appointed *choregoi*, prominent individuals whose duty it was to finance the performance of a poet's work by paying for the chorus. A similar system of financing – called the 'liturgy' system – was used for most festivals and for military expenditure too. The liturgy both acted as a tax on the wealthy and enabled the wealthy to compete for status with greater displays of largesse towards the city. Aeschylus was funded at least once in his career by Pericles, who became the most powerful and influential politician of the era. Actors too were assigned to plays by lot. There were three actors for each play, who divided the different roles between them – a procedure which required considerable virtuosity from the actors, who might be required to play a young girl and an old man in the same play. All the actors were male and were citizens. The Great Dionysia was, then, first and foremost a festival controlled, financed and organized by the democratic *polis*.

In the ninth month of the calendar year, roughly corresponding to our March, the festival took place. Before the festival proper started, the statue of Dionysus, the god in whose honour the festival took place, was removed from its precinct next to the theatre, taken out of the city, and brought in procession from the village of Eleutherai outside Athens to the theatre, where it stood throughout



the festival. A couple of days before the plays, the playwrights publicly announced the subjects of their plays, and presented their casts to the city in a ceremony called the *proagon*. The first day of the festival proper began, however, as with so many religious occasions in Greece, with a huge procession (*pompe*), in this case of citizens, metics and others, all finely dressed, many carrying models of an erect phallus, a Dionysian symbol of fertility and celebration. Bulls were led too for a sacrifice that ended in a huge feast of meat (rarely eaten by Athenians, except on festival occasions) and wine. There were competitions of choral singing, with men's and boys' choruses, organized on a tribal basis (and funded by liturgies). Even prisoners on 'death-row' were released from custody on bail to join the communal celebrations.

On each of the next three days, each of the three tragic playwrights presented three tragedies and a satyr play. The three tragedies could be connected as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but also could be on three separate topics, though it is unclear to what degree such plays might have been thematically linked. The satyr play always had a chorus of satyrs (half-men, half-goats with tails and constant erections) and were short, often uproarious, vulgar and escapist plays, that offered release from the tension of tragedy, as well as a thoroughly Dionysiac experience (the satyrs are the miscreant attendants of the god). Before the tragedies took place, a series of ceremonies were performed in the theatre (Goldhill 1990). There were first a sacrifice and a libation poured by the ten generals (the ten most important – and elected, rather than chosen by lot – military and political officials of the state). It was quite rare for the generals to act together in this way: no more than four such religious occasions are recorded in any one year, and this appears to be the only regular occasion in the calendar when all the generals perform such a ritual. Second, there was an announcement of the names of all those citizens who had benefited the *polis* and who had thus been awarded a crown (an honorific gesture by the state). This was an occasion publicly to emphasize the duties and obligations of the citizen to the *polis* (as well as praising prominent individuals). Third, there was a parade of young men, whose fathers had died fighting for the *polis*. These orphans were supported by the *polis* and educated at public expense, and when they reached the age of

manhood they were paraded in full armour, again provided by the *polis*, and they publicly affirmed a proclamation that as their fathers had died for the *polis*, here they stood ready to take their places in the military ranks. Another opportunity is thus taken to demonstrate publicly the duties of the democratic citizen – duties conceived here precisely in terms of the military obligations I discussed briefly above. After 454, a fourth ceremonial also took place – the display of the tribute of the states of the Athenian empire, ingot by ingot of silver. It is not hard to see how this huge procession of allies' tribute glorified the military and political influence of Athens. The four ceremonials before the plays, then, use a state festival to project and promote the self-image of the state as military and political power, and to stage the binding affiliation of citizen to state. It is not only the plays but the whole occasion that addresses the citizen body. The Great Dionysia is in all senses truly a festival of the democratic *polis*.

On the fifth day of the festival, the five comedies were staged. (During the Peloponnesian War, it seems that only three comedies were performed, one after each of the tragedian's offerings. Thus, during the war the festival lasted only four days; though no explicit reasons for this cut-back survive, the war itself has been plausibly suggested to be a major factor, with the need to transfer funds to the military effort.) Two days later an Assembly was held in the theatre to consider how the festival had been conducted – the democratic requirement of accountability.

The tragedians with their *choregoi* were in competition: ten judges, one per tribe, were elected by lot in a complex procedure designed to avoid any chance of bribery or prejudice. The competition was fiercely and often passionately undertaken, and not merely by the writers and their funders. After 449, there was also a competition for actors in tragedies (and from 442 for actors in comedies too). That the production of plays was competitive is typical of Athenian culture. The Assembly, with competing proposals being put to the vote; the law-court with prosecutor and defendant judged by a large citizen audience; the gymnasium with its wrestling bouts, races and erotic pursuits (not to mention the Olympics and other pan-hellenic games) – all these are institutions for which competition is a fundamental structuring principle. Greek and especially

Athenian culture was at all levels highly competitive, despite the ideological projections of equality and communal commitment.

There are many ways, then, in which this *polis*-funded, *polis*-organized, *polis*-accountable festival is paradigmatic of Athenian democratic institutions. Yet there is a further and perhaps more important way that the Great Dionysia and its genres of drama are a product of democracy. For the plays themselves, as much as the festival, are deeply imbued with a spirit of competition. The *agon*, or formal debate/contest/ struggle, is a repeated and basic element of all Greek drama. Often character faces character, expresses a position with a set speech, is opposed by a set speech, and the scene turns to passionate line by line disagreement. This formal element – an analogue to the Assembly and law-court – is perhaps the key sign and symptom of what Vernant and Vidal-Naquet call ‘the tragic moment’.

By ‘the tragic moment’ these influential French scholars are proposing an answer to the question of why did tragedy arise at this time and in this place. For them, tragedy as a genre appears at a particular moment of an unresolved clash between two general views of man’s place in the world – which they call the ‘archaic’ and the ‘legal’. The importance of law to democracy has been stressed already. The legal system assumes that a man is responsible for his actions, can be judged as a responsible individual for those actions, and that punishment is to be weighed out according to that judgement. In the mythical and heroic traditions of archaic society, however, it is the justice of the gods that prevails. So in Homer error, success, desire, even the flight of an arrow or the glance of a woman are directed by the immediate and explicit influence of divinities (and the whole *Iliad* is placed under the rubric of ‘the plan of Zeus’). Tragedy takes place, then, at the moment of maximal unresolved tension between such systems of ideas – it is both sign and symptom of such tensions. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet write: ‘The tragic turning point thus occurs when a gap develops at the heart of social existence. It is wide enough for the opposition between legal and political thought on the one hand, and the mythical and heroic tradition, on the other, to stand out quite clearly. Yet it is narrow enough for the conflict in values to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place.’ Tragedy thus stages through its structure of the *agon* a division in

social thought. It explores the different and competing ideals, different and competing obligations, different and competing senses of words in the developing *polis*, different and competing ideas of glory and success. It shows characters failing to communicate, clinging to ideas, and tearing themselves and society apart. It discovers tensions and ambiguities within the very civic ideology of democracy that is the context of tragedy's performance.

The Greeks, as ever, have a word for it: *es meson*, which can literally be translated 'into the middle', but within fifth-century democracy means 'to be put into the public domain to be contested'. Tragedy takes the developing notions, vocabulary, commitments of democracy and places them under rigorous, polemical, violent and *public* scrutiny. Athenian democracy prided itself on the openness of its institutions and its willingness to have both sides of a case heard (however much practice could distort such ideology). None the less, this civic occasion on which a society gathered together to stage a sophisticated, searching, moving exploration of its own beliefs and processes remains – not least for our Western society – a remarkable and salutary example.

#### 4 *The context of the theatre*

If the social and ideological background of theatre is so different from today, what of the theatrical resources themselves? We have seen how the festival context of Greek tragedy radically alters the sense of how theatre functions as a social experience. Now, to conclude this opening chapter, we must look briefly at the theatre itself.

I have already described how each playwright was required to compose three tragedies and a satyr play for the competition, and how the selection was termed 'to be granted a chorus'. The chorus remains one of the most difficult areas of Greek dramaturgy to appreciate and I wish to start my consideration of the theatre with it. The chorus was made up of citizens (so too, as I have mentioned, were the actors: there was no sub-class of 'theatricals' as in Rome, even when the actors formed guilds and famous acting families grew up through the fifth and fourth centuries). There were probably twelve members of the chorus of the *Oresteia*, though some scholars argue, perhaps rightly, that fifteen, the usual number in later years,

is likely for Aeschylus too (Taplin). The chorus' members were selected for a performance (like the actors) and were trained by a special trainer for the songs and dances they were required to perform. Like the actors, the chorus was fully masked. These masks were not the grotesque 'tragic masks' with down-turned mouths and gaping eyes, familiar from modern theatre decorations, but carefully painted figural representations. The chorus performed in a dancing area called the *orchestra*, below the raised stage on which the actors performed. It became normal that there was a backdrop in the form of a house/palace with a door, through which a trolley could be rolled to reveal a prepared tableau (the *ekkeklemma*), and it has been plausibly suggested that the *Oresteia* is the first work we have to use this later standard organization of stage space. Actors entered through the door or from long entrance ways to the left and right of the acting space. The acting space with its separate areas thus helped create a specific dialectical relation between collective chorus in the *orchestra* and individual actors on the stage.

Although modern stage conventions often find it hard to deal with a constant collective presence on stage, the difficulties of interpreting the role of the chorus go beyond this difference of audience expectation, and stem from what can be seen as a duality of role. On the one hand, the chorus sings the choral odes that divide the different scenes of the drama. These were accompanied by music and dance (both these aspects of performance have been lost), and these songs contain the drama's densest lyric poetry that often comments on and reacts to the previous scene of the play. These choral odes often speak from a general and generalizing viewpoint. On the other hand, the chorus also takes part in the scenes of the play as a dramatic persona and engages from a specific point of view in the scenic action.

Let us explore this duality a little further. The chorus as an institution is deeply embedded in Greek culture. To sing and dance in choruses was a normal and basic part of education for both boys and girls: it was a way of passing down the privileged narratives of a culture in a collective and didactic form. So, too, as I have mentioned, there were other choral competitions at the Great Dionysia, where the ten tribes provided five men's and five boys' choruses. Thus it is easy to see why the chorus in tragedy is often treated as

the most expressly didactic voice of the play. Few today would say it expresses simply the views of the poet himself (as many Victorian critics liked to believe), but many would argue that the collective voice of the chorus mirrors, mediates and otherwise directs the collective response of the audience. A collective sounding-board, as it were, for the collective of the *polis*.

Yet the chorus is made up also of specific, even characterized figures, who speak from a particular perspective and with particular interests. How is the collective, generalizing, didactic voice of the chorus to be related to this sense of individual characterization? The problem is most acutely realized in the *Eumenides*, the third play of the *Oresteia*. The chorus of this play is made up of the Furies (*Erinyes*), who pursue Orestes to exact blood vengeance. They also sing a long ode about justice in the city. How are their general reflections on justice, then, to be related to their pursuit of blood vengeance? I do not think that there can be a single model which will explain – or predict – how generally or how specifically any particular chorus' remarks are to be taken. Rather, I would prefer to see the chorus' collective voice as posing for the audience a problem of relating common wisdom or general views to the specific incidents of the drama. I have described tragedy as provoking, exploring, questioning notions about the city's behaviour and ideals. The chorus as collective voice has a particular role to play in the *agon* of attitudes that makes up tragedy. It requires the audience to engage in a constant renegotiation of where the authoritative view lies. It sets in play an authoritative collective voice, but surrounds it with other dissenting voices. The chorus both allows a wider picture of the action to develop, and also remains one of the many views expressed. The chorus is thus a key dramatic device for setting in play commentary, reflection and an authoritative collective voice as part of tragic conflict.

What of the audience of the drama? The spectators – perhaps as many as 16,000 – were ranged in wedge-shaped sections in the amphitheatre. The front seats were reserved for dignitaries. It is also likely that the seating was arranged by tribal division, with each tribe seated in a particular wedge. The theatre thus mapped the city in its space as it addressed the city in its plays. Over the years, foreigners attended the Great Dionysia with increasing frequency,

and, after the transfer of the treasury from Delos, the ambassadors who brought the tribute to Athens sat in the theatre to watch its display. Unfortunately, we do not have any decisive piece of evidence that can demonstrate whether women were allowed in the theatre. Scholars debate the issue at length, but without a consensus. One thing is clear, however: if there were any women there, they were in the vast minority and were not the 'proper or intended' audience (Henderson). Greek tragedy, with its all-male cast, all-male producers and writers and male audience, remains a citizen affair.

With masked male actors, a singing, dancing, masked male chorus, a vast audience seated according to the formal sociopolitical divisions of the state, in a five-day festival in honour of the god Dionysus, a festival whose ceremonies are replete with social and cultural significance . . . the contexts of Greek tragedy are far removed, indeed, from Western bourgeois theatre, tragedy's heir.

So, then, Greek tragedy should not be viewed simply as an aesthetic, emotional or ritual experience (although it is all three of these). It is also an event that places the tensions and ambiguities of a rapidly developing political and cultural system in the public domain to be contested. What is more, the *Oresteia* itself ends, unlike all other extant tragedies, in the centre of the democratic *polis* of Athens, its law-court. The play speaks to the *polis*. The *Oresteia* is in the full sense of the term a *political* drama; and awaits your – our – verdict.