

CHAPTER I



The problem of space

Plato's Atlantis purports to be the ideal city-state which existed in the golden age before human beings lost their portion of divinity. Plato conceives his ideal *polis* as a macrocosm of the body, and his conception of the body is dualist: the head, which in the body houses the soul, becomes in the state the home of political power.¹ While the 'body' of the *polis* is conceived as a rectangular grid, divided by canals, power resides in a circular island surrounded by two concentric rings of land. Communication with the outside world is necessarily by sea, and is channelled via this circular 'head'. Water passes through the 'head' to the 'body' just as air passes to the body through the head of the human being. At the centre of the 'head' in Atlantis is a sanctuary, with its standard Greek appurtenances of a temple, a grove and a spring, so 'god' is equivalent to 'soul'. Close to the sanctuary is the palace, for the king is a descendant of the god Poseidon, and there is no cleavage between religion and politics in this utopia. The inner ring-island is primarily defensive, and is occupied by warriors who maintain the power of the regime at the centre, whilst the outer ring-island contains a horse-racing circuit. There is of course no theatre in this state, for theatre, as Plato argued in *The Republic*, offers its public a debased view of the gods. The horses orbit the sanctuary of Poseidon at the centre as the planets orbit the earth, for the sacred circle of this city is not only a macrocosm of the head but a microcosm of the universe. Plato drew inspiration from the cities of the east. Herodotus describes the real city of Ecbatana as surrounded by seven concentric rings of fortification modelled upon the seven planetary spheres.²

Plato's Atlantis illustrates the importance of space in Greek religious, political and philosophical thought. The implementation of democracy involved the careful division of Attica into political units so that ten tribes would each

¹ Plato, *Critias*. The dialogue (extant only in a fragment) is a sequel to the *Timaeus* in which Plato worked out at length the relationship between the geocentric cosmos and the human head. ² Herodotus i.98.

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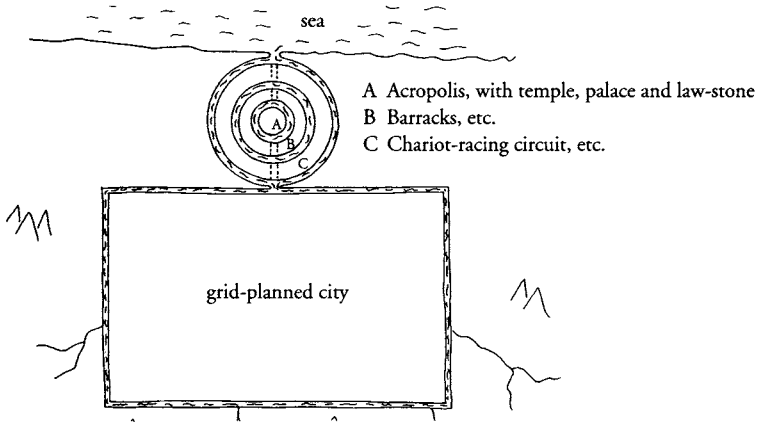


Figure 1 Atlantis

have an equal weighting of membership from different interest groups. For our purposes Atlantis must be seen not as a utopia but as a heterotopia that defines by its difference the spatial conceptions and practices of classical Athens. Plato's city is sacred not to Athene but to Poseidon, in myth Athene's rival for control of Attica. In Athens we see the same opposition of circle and grid, for the Peiraeus was laid out on a grid pattern in the mid fifth century, in accordance with the geometric logic of equal distribution, to house a swelling urban population behind secure walls, but the sacred centre of the city remained the Acropolis with its ring of fortification surrounding the temple of Athene. In democratic Athens, unlike Atlantis, the seat of political power separated itself from the religious centre and lay elsewhere, in the Agora and the Assembly. This was a schism that Plato sought to rectify, and he makes his point by comparing Atlantis with a golden-age Athens built on a huge, fortified Acropolis that contains both temple and palace. Plato's most radical conceptual innovation was his dualist separation of head and body, and this new schism was to have enormous influence in the Christian era. The soul or breath of life was not located in the head in fifth-century thinking but in the body, and topographically Athens was at the centre of Attica rather than an appendage on the periphery. Atlantis is structured in order to illustrate Plato's new conception of space that is simultaneously dualist and centred.

By way of festive celebration (for 'entertainment' is too secular a term, and thus too modern), Plato offers a chariot race sacred to Poseidon, god of horses, in which we may assume that representatives of the ten tribes descended from the god's ten sons competed. In Athens representatives of the ten tribes com-

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peted by dancing a circular dance in honour of Dionysus in a location that was likewise on the margins of the sacred centre. Plato describes how in a kind of game the ten kings of Atlantis chased ten bulls loose in the precinct, sacrificed them at a central stone on which the laws were inscribed and then feasted before finally dispensing justice. There is again a parallel with the Dionysia, when representatives of the ten tribes took bulls to the sanctuary, sacrificed them and organized a feast before the tragedies were performed.³ Tragedy might by this analogy be seen as a mode of dispensing painful justice to the people, following a symbolic reaffirmation of the god-given structure of the community.

Plato's conception of space as a repository of truth, allowing one to move from the microcosm of the human individual and the macrocosm of the god-given universe to the difficult question of how human beings should live together in society, provides a context for my enquiries in this book. Space was not an objective, scientific given in classical Athens but a subject for speculation, experiment and negotiation. Theatre is pre-eminently a spatial medium, for it can dispense with language on occasion but never with space. Like Atlantis, the theatre must be seen as a 'heterotopia', a term which I borrow from Foucault to refer to a place where 'the real sites, all the other real sites that are found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted'.⁴ I do not propose to set up any sharp dichotomy in this book between the theatre and the play for the two are functionally interdependent, just like the Parthenon and the giant statue of Athene Parthenos which it housed. The question must be how events in a heterotopia dedicated to Dionysus represented, contested and inverted the *polis* at large.

Peter Brook's words have become famous: 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.'⁵ As early as 1922, Gordon Craig pleaded for the theatre to be an 'empty space' in which one could insert a stage design and auditorium appropriate to each performance;⁶ but Brook's were inspirational words in the revolutionary year of 1968, suggesting in their context the abolition of the red curtains and foyer rituals of the 'deadly' bourgeois theatre. They provided an ideological underpinning for a generation of black box studio theatres where allegedly anything can happen, any actor–audience relationship can be established. The reality is

³ On festive arrangements, see Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *La Cité au banquet* (Rome, 1992) 125, 131–2.

⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces', tr. J Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986) 22–7.

⁵ *The Empty Space* (London, 1968) 9.

⁶ Marginalia cited by Denis Bablet in *Le Lieu théâtral dans la société moderne* (Paris, 1969) 22.

that these 'neutral' spaces impose their own rigid constraints, and the dream of 1968 that human beings are infinitely adaptable soon faded. Peter Brook was well aware that he could not 'take any empty space' when in 1974 he established his permanent operational headquarters in a faded Victorian theatre in Paris, the Bouffes du Nord. To create theatre to his satisfaction he needed a space crafted with skill and imbued with history.

The idea that there can be an 'empty space' has been discredited. Physics has demonstrated that the empty space of the cosmos is bounded and filled with mysterious particles. Ernst Gombrich, in his seminal work on visual perception, has shown that the artist never starts from *tabula rasa*, a blank canvas, but modifies received schemata. His work develops the recognition of Ernst Kris 'that art is not produced in an empty space, that no artist is independent of predecessors and models'.⁷ The mind of the viewer is no empty bucket waiting to receive sensory data, but forms hypotheses and searches for differences that separate one sign from another. Gombrich develops the insight of structuralism that human communication depends upon establishing a system of differences, and sounds or images *in vacuo* have no meaning. Foucault's post-structuralist essay on space pursues the same theme: 'We do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things . . . we live inside a set of relations'.⁸ My theme in this book will be that the Greek theatre was not an empty space. Greek performances were created within and in response to a network of pre-existent spatial relationships.

The idea that Greek drama should be understood in relation to the visual arts as much as the literary arts runs against the grain of the academic tradition. The academic world has been preoccupied rather with the dimension of time than with space: the errors that have crept into the text, prior authorial thinking realized by the text, later critical readings of the text, the relationship of the playwright's thought to grand historical narratives. Archaeology has likewise been obsessed by periodicity, uncovering the different temporal layers of an excavated structure. The space of the theatre and the question of what is said (and done) in that space are relegated to different sub-disciplines within classics. Early in the twentieth century, the 'Cambridge anthropologists' were less diffident about performance, for they were happy to see drama as a 'ritual'. Gilbert Murray was happy both to edit an Oxford Classical text and to translate for professional performance. It was perhaps the rise of 'English Literature' to a position of hegemony within the Arts faculty that made classicists look to their laurels and offer Greek literature as a competing product, not primitive ritual but a sophisticated art touching the highest realms of consciousness.

⁷ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London, 1977) 25.

⁸ 'Of other spaces' 23.

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While Arthur Pickard-Cambridge in the 1940s looked at the context of drama – the theatre and festival of Dionysus – other scholars concerned themselves with the quite separate question of content. In the 1950s and 1960s T. B. L. Webster and scholars associated with him (notably A. M. Dale and N. Hourmouziades) pursued energetic research into monuments and textual detail in order to clarify the performance conventions of Greek tragedy, but the question of what the play meant remained, if not a *noli me tangere*, at least little touched by this body of research.

The publication of Oliver Taplin's thesis *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* in 1973 in many ways opened a new era. Taplin insisted that the playwright wrote for the spectator, and that meaning is to be sought in the visual image. He staked out his ground around the phrase 'visual meaning', restoring the Aristotelian category of *opsis* to a place of more honour than Aristotle himself allowed.⁹ His work demonstrated that the analyst of stagecraft had to engage in the academically respectable activity of close reading, and it was a clear inference that editors who failed to examine the text with due attention to the requirements of performance were failing in their duty. At the same time, Taplin had a magic wand to wave with his 'working hypothesis that there was no important action which was not also signalled in the words'.¹⁰ There is no logical basis for this hypothesis, since playwrights did not in the first instance compose their works for a reading public, and, if not actors themselves, they were present in person to advise the actors. Taplin nevertheless attempts a justification: 'If actions are to be significant, which means they must be given concentrated attention, then time and words must be spent on them.'¹¹ This was manna to philology because it confirmed that the written text represents the complete work of art. Language remains pre-eminent, and time wins out over space. The philologist needs to acquire a new bag of tricks, but can continue in the same trade of scrutinizing words and words alone.

I shall examine at some length Taplin's popularizing sequel *Greek Tragedy in Action* (1978) because in that book many aesthetic and ideological assumptions latent in *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* become overt. Taplin's work has had enormous influence, and represents what I take to be a normative position within the academic community vis-à-vis Greek tragic performance. There is no *tabula rasa* for academics any more than for painters, and an analysis of Taplin's work will enable me to articulate my own very different point of view.

Taplin's first premiss is the existence of an 'author's immutable meaning'.

⁹ On *opsis* (spectacle) see Taplin's appendix in *SA* 477–9; Lowell Edmunds argues for a more positive Aristotelian view in 'The blame of Karkinos' *Drama* 1 (1992) 214–39. I have examined Taplin's work in the light of Simon Goldhill's critique in 'Reading Greek performance' *Greece and Rome* 34 (1987) 136–51. ¹⁰ *SA* 30. ¹¹ *SA* 31.

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There is, he argues, a communicative intention behind the work which the critic has to uncover. Taplin concedes also that the author may not have been fully conscious of this meaning, for the human mind works on many levels. The only way for the critic to gain access to this meaning is thus to enquire:

‘Is it there?’ If the point is to be accepted, it should (broadly speaking) meet three conditions: it should be *prominent*, *coherent* and *purposeful*. There is no definitive court of appeal on this (though time and the community of informed opinion form a lower court). Ultimately the interpretation of art is subjective and personal; it is not verifiable.¹²

The argument turns full circle. If interpretation is ultimately subjective, then the question ‘Is it there?’ has to be reformulated as ‘Do I see it?’ The reference to majority opinion over the years comprising a kind of lower court of appeal is full of dangers, and Taplin himself plainly attempts to change received opinions. Modern perceptions of Greek tragedy have been shaped by a Renaissance tradition leaning heavily upon Aristotle and Horace. ‘Time and the community of informed opinion’ may, I would suggest, be a highly misleading guide to the drama of a democratic culture which, in the eyes of most Hellenistic, Roman and Renaissance critics, constituted a highly dangerous political model.

In place of Taplin’s absolutist ‘Is it there?’, I shall attempt to open up a gap in this book between ‘Do I see it?’ and ‘Did they see it?’ Although he acknowledges some value in cultural relativism, Taplin’s liberal-humanist approach focusses on what humans have in common: ‘But to lay exclusive stress on the *differences* is no less of a distortion than to assume unqualified similarity. Difference is a matter of degree and quality. And ultimately it is the almost uncanny similarity or timelessness of the Greeks which demands our attention.’¹³ He rejects a ‘naive historicist’ approach to the culture of the past which attempts an imaginative identification with the original audience. I would prefer to reverse Taplin’s formulation and suggest that ‘our attention demands of the Greeks an uncanny timelessness’. In arguing for the universality of Greek tragedy, Taplin places himself squarely within the Aristotelian tradition.¹⁴ He repeats the plea of Shylock and urges that we all ‘have hopes, fears, feel sorrow and joy – live with bread, feel want, taste grief, need friends’. Tragedy, he asserts ‘is essentially the *emotional experience of its audience*’.¹⁵ Pity and fear, it would seem, are the same, whether felt by a fifth-century Athenian or a twentieth-century Englishman.

My own approach to Greek tragedy stems more from Plato than from Aristotle. In *The Laws*, Plato explores the diversity of human responses to

¹² *GTA* 6. Taplin’s italics. ¹³ *GTA* 7–8. ¹⁴ *Poetics* ix.3–1451b.

¹⁵ *GTA* 8, 169. Taplin’s italics.

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drama. The unjust man finds that injustice looks pleasant, the just man does not, and a double response is possible in the case of the man who has only superficially become just. When human beings differ from each other so much, there can be no question of a universal emotional response. Plato condemns as an insupportable doctrine the majority view – implicitly, the majority view that has emerged during the fourth century – that art should be judged simply on its power to give pleasure.¹⁶ Looking back nostalgically at the fifth century, he identifies an audience that behaved with more restraint, and allowed the panel of judges to be ‘teachers’, evaluating the kind of pleasure that the audience has received. He constructs an ideal fifth-century spectator who is capable of (1) recognizing what has been shown, (2) evaluating the skill of the representation through an understanding of its technique, and (3) forming a moral evaluation. Plato allows the Dionysiac chorus to remain as an institution in *The Laws* because he understands the spectator as someone capable of rationality, not merely of feeling.¹⁷ His faith in the thinking spectator is supported by the evidence of Aristophanes. In *The Frogs* the poets are judged upon technique, and upon whether their plays will save the city. Technique in *The Frogs* always has a moral dimension. In *Women at the Thesmophoria*, Aristophanes likewise assumes that his audience will be interested in how plays are made. In both plays he parodies Hippolytus’ line ‘My tongue it was that swore.’ The audience was fascinated by this line not because it induced feelings of pity and fear, one may surmise, but because of intellectual outrage. Anecdotes tell of strong audience response to intellectual sentiments about the subjectivity of moral values, the goodness of money, and the merely nominal existence of Zeus.¹⁸ I am not suggesting that the audience was unfeeling, but rather that its emotions could be triggered by ideas, and by the relationship of what it saw inside the theatre to what it knew of the world outside the theatre. The thought/feeling dichotomy is unacceptably reductive. Taplin’s audience learns from tragedy ‘to understand and cope with’ the ‘misfortunes of human life’.¹⁹ It was this model of the passive spectator who copes with life rather than changes it that led Brecht and Boal to their influential Marxist critique of ‘Aristotelian’ theatre.²⁰

Taplin’s view of tragedy is strictly Aristotelian. It is important to him that tragedy should be a closed system, and Aristotelian closure (the principle that a play should have a clear beginning, middle and end) governs space as well as narrative. The boundary between the world of the audience and the world of the play is seen as hermetic. There is, Taplin writes, ‘in my view not one single

¹⁶ *Laws* 655–6. ¹⁷ *Laws* 659, 669. ¹⁸ *DFA* 274–5. ¹⁹ *GTA* 171.

²⁰ Augusto Boal in *Theater of the Oppressed*, tr. C. A. and M.-O. L. McBride (London, 1979), chapter 1, develops Brecht’s glancing references to Aristotle into a systematic critique of a ‘coercive system of tragedy’.

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place in the whole of Greek tragedy where there is direct audience address, or specific reference to the audience or to members of the audience'.²¹ The idea that we today and the Athenians then share the same basic human response to the play presupposes a clear subject–object relationship: the spectator as subject gazing at the play as object. If, instead, we see the Athenian audience as an integral part of the event created in the Theatre of Dionysus, being in itself a semantic element, then we shall find it impossible to separate 'the play' from the audience watching that play. We shall cease to construe the audience as co-subject, watching the play as we do, and will have to construe it as part of the event that we are trying to understand. The phenomenon of 'the play itself' becomes impossible to isolate. Taplin's insistence upon an absolute divide between play and audience is a necessary rider to his proposition that behind 'the play' lies an immutable authorial meaning. My own search as critic will not be for an authorial meaning existing somewhere within, behind or prior to the text, but rather for an event set in space and time, and for a process or system of communication.

Taplin shares Aristotle's preference for Sophocles over Euripides – an aesthetic judgement that was not shared by later antiquity. He begins by confessing subjectivity, but rapidly slides into a more authoritative stance:

I will not disguise the fact that I find Euripides the least great of the three great tragedians. His oeuvre is uneven in quality, and several of the tragedies are very uneven internally . . . He is the most explicitly intellectual of the three, and sometimes contrives set-piece conflicts for the sake of the issues themselves rather than integrating those issues in a convincing human setting. These may be brilliant; but judged by the highest standards they are still flawed.²²

By what canon, we may ask, can one ever define absolute aesthetic standards? Can one ever say, for example, that Greek art is 'better' than Egyptian art? Euripides is apparently faulted because he does not create artistic unity, and does not privilege the emotional vis-à-vis the cognitive. Taplin's criteria are humanist and psychological: everything must be subordinated to and contained by a 'convincing human setting'.

In accordance with his humanist vision, and his sense that Greek tragedy is timeless, Taplin denies any significant place to religion in the making of the dramatic event. Ritual activities connected to the festival of the god are seen as extraneous:

the fact is that these circumstances have left no trace whatsoever on the tragedies themselves, no trace of the Dionysiac occasion, the time of year, the priests, the surround-

²¹ *GTA* 187 n.5. ²² *GTA* 28.

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ing rituals, nothing . . . I do not see any way in which the Dionysiac occasion invades or affects the entertainment . . . To put it another way, there is nothing intrinsically Dionysiac about Greek tragedy.²³

Again, we see Taplin setting up a hermetic environment for the play that he will analyse. He is at one with the materialist thinking of Aristotle when he denies any religious element to artistic experience. Plato's understanding of drama in *The Laws* is very different, and his concern is emphatically with festival rather than text:

The gods took pity on the human race, born to toil, and gave it an alternative in the form of religious festivals to serve as a respite from labour. They provided as festive companions the Muses, together with Apollo leader of the Muses, and Dionysus – so that by sharing their feasts with gods men could set straight their way of life.²⁴

The Dionysiac chorus is central to Plato's concept of theatre. He is concerned with the way music and dance train the body and thus fashion the soul. In *The Laws* he subverts the conventions of the festival he knew by having the old rather than the young dancing in the Dionysiac chorus. In order to make this possible, the young will be denied wine, the old will be allowed wine. The god of wine and the god of theatre is conceived by Plato as a single entity.²⁵ Dionysus, festival and chorus are placed at the centre of Plato's analysis, but marginalized by Aristotle. Taplin follows 'time and the community of informed opinion' in opting not for Plato the Athenian but for Aristotle the cultural outsider. Plato's conception of tragedy as in essence a Dionysiac dance may to us seem culturally alien and metaphysical, but that is no reason to discard it in favour of what seems familiar.

The chorus is conspicuous by its absence from Taplin's pages. He explains that 'the chorus will inevitably receive comparatively little attention in this book, since it is not as a rule closely involved in the *action* and plot of the tragedies'.²⁶ Taplin follows the Aristotelian premiss that a tragedy is an imitation of an action, and that plot (*mythos*) has theoretical primacy. It is the place of choral song, he writes, 'to move into a different world'. The relationship between the world of the plot that is 'tied down in place and time' and this 'different world' is not one that Taplin is concerned to explore, because of a preference for the material over the metaphysical. My own premiss in this book will be that both worlds are coexistent in theatrical space, and each informs the other. Taplin adds one final comment on the chorus: 'If only we knew more of

²³ *GTA* 162.

²⁴ *Laws* 653. I have borrowed some phrases from the translation by T. J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, 1970), but have rejected Saunders' reference to men being 'made whole again'. ²⁵ *Laws* 666. ²⁶ *GTA* 13.

their choreography and music, then the tragic chorus might find a larger place; but, as it is, my glass will inevitably focus on the actors.' We return to the problem of 'significant action' which Taplin alleges is always knowable. Here he seems to confess that it might not be. He asserts in broad terms that differences between us and the Greeks are less striking than similarities, but refuses to look at the chorus because he feels that he is not in a position to understand. If he elects to focus on the areas that seem easy for the modern world to understand, then differences will perforce vanish. Taplin's conclusions about Greek tragedy follow inexorably from his premisses.

Let us pass from theory to practice and see how Taplin's methodology generates a particular way of analysing stage action. I shall quote, as a representative sample, his analysis of the stage action at the end of *Hippolytus*.

I have already touched on the suggestion that in the last 20 lines of *Hipp* the mortals are made to compare favourably with the petty vindictiveness of the two goddesses. The simple, noble stage actions contribute to the moving quality of this final episode. Hippolytus has probably been lain down on a bier earlier: he calls on his father:

Ah, darkness now descends upon my eyes.

Hold me, my father, and set straight my corpse.

So the two form a close group, with Theseus probably kneeling by his son and embracing him. At this point Hippolytus releases him from all guilt for his death: this is not just a noble gesture, it meant in Attic law that the killer was absolved from all further prosecution and punishment. Theseus tries to comfort Hippolytus, but there is no help for it:

My strength is spent. Yes, father, I am dead.

Quick now cloak my face over.

So Theseus covers his head with a veil (in very different circumstances from other more notorious veilings); and then he stands up. The separation of death is compulsory. Theseus turns to go into the desolated palace, and Hippolytus' companions presumably follow him with the corpse. As he goes, his last line – 'How keenly, Kypris, shall I dwell on your malice' – recaptures the contrast between god and man in the whole preceding tragedy.²⁷

The great value of Taplin's book, which I do not wish in any way to underestimate, lies in its insistence that the reader must look at the visual action. Taplin rightly emphasizes that this closing scene of *Hippolytus* is built around a striking stage action when Theseus covers the face of the dying Hippolytus. The problems come when Taplin tries to reach towards the authorial meaning which is supposed to lie behind the stage action.

Taplin's precept that modern and ancient spectators share the same human response to human emotions has to be reconciled with the fact that viewing

²⁷ *GTA* 71–2. I have omitted cross-references and line references included in Taplin's text.