

1 | Introduction

[. . .] Say this is patriotic, out of date.
But you are wrong. It never is too late

For nights of stars and feet that move to an
Iambic measure; all who clapped were linked,
The theatre is our treasury and too,
Our study, schoolroom, house where mercy is

Dispensed with justice. Shakespeare has the mood
And draws the music from the dullest heart.
This is our birthright, speeches for the dumb
And unaccomplished. [. . .]

– from Elizabeth Jennings, “A Performance of Henry V
at Stratford-upon-Avon”

Aeschylus and Aristophanes wrote for a crowd. Like Shakespeare, they did not only cater to the sophisticated and educated, but also drew “music from the dullest heart” and offered speeches for the “dumb and unaccomplished.”¹ It is perhaps for this reason that, in the absence of direct written evidence from most citizens of ancient Athens, plays have sometimes been tapped for the views of the audience, and, by extension, for a good segment of the population. The special political circumstances of Athenian theater further encourage the reading of ancient plays as products of a democracy, and as sources for democratic ideas and ideals.² Scholars have argued that it was the competition and intellectual vigor encouraged by the democracy that led to the development of theater first in

¹ Jennings’ poem is printed in Jennings (1986) 209.

² For studies of connections between Athenian theater and Athenian democracy, see, for example, Connor (1990); Winkler and Zeitlin (1992); Easterling (1997); Pelling (1997). Here and throughout I use the term democratic in its loosest sense, implying not the minutiae of Athenian institutional procedure but the more general concept of the active participation of the *demos* in government. More important for this argument is the rhetoric of democratic freedom and independence than the detail of governmental organization. It should be noted, however, that cogent arguments against the intrinsically democratic origins and nature of tragedy as a genre have been formulated by Rhodes (2003) and Carter (2004).

Athens.³ On this model, the plays gave expression to particularly democratic concerns and the audience represented the newly empowered citizen body.⁴ This work has yielded a fairly comprehensive theory of how plays were part of the democratic machinery of fifth-century Athens. Although this approach begins by rooting itself in Athens historically, it has led in many instances to the conclusion that Greek theater *as a medium and tragedy and comedy as genres* were intrinsically democratic phenomena.⁵

The association between early Greek theater and democracy is compelling, but evidence from outside Athens, in particular from Sicily, complicates the picture. Some of the most important evidence for ancient Greek theater comes from Sicilian cities controlled by tyrants: the very early comic fragments of Epicharmus from the fifth century, the comic so-called “phlyax” vases from the fourth century, and many significant theater buildings. These three crucial categories of evidence are dated to the reign of the Syracusan tyrants Gelon and Hieron in the early fifth century, the tyrant Dionysius I at the beginning of the fourth century, and Hieron II in the third century. From the brief democratic periods in Sicily, only few and controversial theatrical artifacts survive.⁶ Most notably, during the latter half of the fifth century, when Athenian theater was at its height,

³ E.g. Henderson (2001) 267: “For poets and spectators alike, drama was not an escape or a time-out from democratic life, but a form of participation in it.”; Saïd (2001); Cartledge (1997). In a controversial interpretation, Connor (1990) pushes the origins of the City Dionysia to a later date (ca 501) to coincide with the beginnings of Athenian democracy and argues that tragedy in its more polished form was introduced to the city at this time. Although he does not suggest that no theatrical performances were carried out before the beginning of the fifth century, he argues that any earlier dramas would have been local rural events. This dating of the first official tragic performances led him to an argument that tragedy itself, like the City Dionysia, which supported it, portrayed democratic ideals. He goes so far as to suggest that the plays celebrated the freedom of the people in the newly democratic state in contrast to the tyranny of a few years before. His argument finds some support in West’s recent exposure of the uncertainty of the traditional dates for the early dramatists, dates which had hitherto been felt to be fairly reliable fixed points: West (1989). Versnell (1995); Osborne (1993); Martin (1995); and Sourvinou-Inwood (1994) all disagree with Connor’s argument. For different theories about the origins of Greek Theater see, for example, Nielsen (2000), who traces cult theaters back to the near East; Kinzl (1980), who also points to Near Eastern beginnings in the dithyramb and the dance; Else (1965) argues for the evolution of “tragodes” from the “rhapsodes,” both professionally and etymologically, and sees close associations between the Homeric tales and the plots of tragedy.

⁴ E.g. Goldhill (1997) 54, “to be in an audience is above all *to play the role of democratic citizen.*” (sic).

⁵ This has often been accepted in the scholarly community beyond Classics. See, for example, Nick Ridout’s summary of Performance Studies theorists’ location of the idealized democratic spectator in classical Athens (Ridout (2008)).

⁶ On two fifth-century figurines from Lipari and Camarina, see Bernabò Brea (2001) 23–5, who suggests they may reflect the comedies of Epicharmus. On vases portraying mythical scenes, which may be related to tragedy, see, more recently, Taplin (2007).

there is little evidence of large-scale popular theatrical productions in Sicily.⁷ Even the evidence for the role of Timoleon, the Corinthian general who became leader of Syracuse in the late 340s, in reviving theater and laying the foundation for monumental theater building in the second half of the fourth century, appears on close examination to be thin, as I argue in Chapter 5. It seems that, in the West, the growth of large-scale, public theater was somehow linked to the tyrants.

Despite this striking association between theater and tyranny, few, if any, studies of western Greek theater examine how drama evolved in Syracuse, or whether it played an important political role there. Instead, western Greek theater is often understood to be derivative of Athenian theater, uprooted from Athens and artificially imported to Syracuse as a foreign luxury good.⁸ Most striking, theater is sometimes described as apolitical in a Sicilian context.⁹

It follows that the very important categories of theatrical evidence from the West are also studied, almost exclusively, in relation to Athens. Sicily's opulent theaters, known playwrights, and collections of dramatic figurines and vases have been used to help explain Athens' performance traditions or to paint a picture of Athenian theater imported to the colonies. Despite the widespread assumption that the comic playwright Epicharmus spent most of his working life in Syracuse, the contexts in which we try to understand his plays are often the Panhellenic and far-flung literary and intellectual circle of contemporary Athenian plays and later Hellenistic and Roman theater.¹⁰ Likewise, the "phlyax" vases are now used to help interpret Athenian comedy, as I discuss in Chapter 5, and western theaters are explained as architecturally and symbolically derivative of the theater of Dionysus in Athens (Chapter 6).

⁷ Tales reported in later sources about the release of Athenians (who had been imprisoned in the quarries of Syracuse after the battle of Syracuse in 413 BCE), if they could sing Euripides' songs, may suggest that the Syracusans were interested in Athenian tragedy (Satyrus, *Life of Euripides* (POxy. 1176, fr. 39, col. 19); Plutarch *Nicias* 29). The Syracusans' eagerness to hear songs remembered by prisoners, however, may also suggest that there were not many public performances of Euripides in Syracuse in the latter half of the fifth century BCE.

⁸ E.g. Cartledge (1997) 5 on theater buildings. See, however, the new arguments of Csapo (2010), in which he proposes that, by the fourth century, Greek drama was thought of as a Panhellenic art form. In this new schema, Greek plays would not have seemed foreign or identifiably Attic, but more generally Greek. For discussion of this theory, see Chapter 5. In Boshier (2013a) I propose some qualifications of this theory: namely that, even if there was a concept of Greek drama, there were *at the same time* local traditions of theater and performance that were commemorated and celebrated even well into the Roman period.

⁹ E.g. Pickard-Cambridge (1962) 239.

¹⁰ E.g. Kherkhof (2001); Pickard-Cambridge (1962). Willi's study (2008), however, considers Epicharmus in the context of other Sicilian writers, see further Chapter 2.

However, given the very significant amount of evidence for theater in the West, and its striking appearance at the same time as the western tyrannies, it seems worthwhile to try to trace the history of Sicilian¹¹ theater in its own political context. This, then is the main argument of this book: in fifth- and fourth-century Sicily, unlike classical Athens, the golden days of theatrical production coincide with the rule of tyrants, rather than with democratic interludes. I suggest that this was not accidental, but that plays and the theater were an integral part of the tyrants' propaganda system. I aim to present a story of the development of literary western theater, without relying on theories relating to and assuming the existence of a sub-literary farce, which probably did exist as well, but for which we have no certain or clear evidence. I offer a framework within which to understand the continuing tradition of theater in the West, which, I suggest, spanned several centuries from Epicharmus at the beginning of the fifth century to the monumental theaters of the third century.

Scholarly reluctance to interpret Sicilian theater in its own political context is partly due to disparate and insufficient evidence, a condition that is slowly being improved by archaeological finds and new interdisciplinary approaches to older material. Another barrier, however, is theoretical: our understanding of ancient Greek theater has become so intimately tied to the democracy of Athens that it is difficult to interpret theater which is linked to a tyranny.¹² The frequent cultural exchanges between Athens and Syracuse confuse the questions still more. So far, one scholarly solution has been to explain the evidence for Syracusan drama as isolated examples of parasitical rivalry and emulation of the urbane brilliance of Athens. This rivalry, and the wealth and resources that the tyrants had at their disposal to pursue such rivalry, are, moreover, no doubt part of the explanation.

The prevailing scholarly interpretation of classical Greek theater as Athenian and democratic does more, however, than break up the history of Sicilian theater into isolated moments of Athenian literary and cultural colonialism. It leaves us without the means to understand theater in a different political circumstance, like the violent and harsh tyrannies of

¹¹ In this volume, I use the term *Sikeliotē* for the Greeks on Sicily and *Italiotē* for the Greeks in South Italy; I use the term "natives" to refer to the indigenous people of Sicily and "Italics" to refer to the indigenous people of South Italy. When discussing the tradition of Sicilian Greek theater as a whole, however, I keep the term Sicilian because I do not mean to draw a sharp distinction between the influences and interests of Greeks and indigenous people on early Sicilian dramatic traditions. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the extant fragments and nearly all of the evidence from Sicily are for Greek-language dramas.

¹² The work of Ann Duncan is likely to change this: see Duncan (2011), (2012), and her forthcoming monograph *Command Performance: Tyranny and Theater in Classical Antiquity*.

Sicily. In foregrounding the communal, interactive function of theater, this interpretation thrusts into the background theater's illusionary and prescriptive capacity to manipulate its audience, in addition to, and sometimes rather than, responding to popular opinion and values. The boundaries between manipulation of the audience and reflection of popularly held beliefs are difficult to trace even in today's plays and movies where so much more evidence is at our disposal, but the dual function of theater seems inherent in the genre.

A few extreme modern parallels remind us of the enormous potential of theater as a political tool:

The National Socialists will reunite people and the stage. We will create a theatre of fifty thousand and hundred thousand; we will draw even the last *Volk* comrade into the magic of dramatic art and enthuse them again and again for the great substance of our national lives.¹³

Thus, Goebbels spelled out a national policy of theater production to German theater directors on May 8, 1933. Mussolini, likewise, used plays to encourage a communal acceptance of Fascist nationalism.¹⁴ Mao¹⁵ and Bolshevik revolutionaries¹⁶ adopted theater as an instrument to further their political goals.¹⁷ Modern dictators take theater seriously in their political planning.

This appeal to modern examples may be a rash starting point for a study of theater under the tyrants of ancient Sicily. Not only have propaganda methods, especially in their practical aspects, evolved in the last twenty-five centuries, but autocratic rulers may well use theater in different ways. Nevertheless, these examples do remind us, even if only in a very general way, that theater has flourished in the most undemocratic of societies.

The power of theater was well known to rulers and to theorists in the ancient world. Plato famously banned independent theater in his ideal republic, replacing it with state-sanctioned public performances.¹⁸

¹³ Cited in Fischer-Lichte (2005) 128. Cf. Zortman (1984); Hofstetter (2004); and Stobl (2007).

¹⁴ Mussolini (1933) "La parola del capo del governo," *Bollettino della Societa Italiana degli Autori ed Editori*, 7–9 (cited in Berezin 1994).

¹⁵ E.g. Chen (2002) 58, "[...] both Mao and Hitler were interested in the particulars of theater production, and both believe with a passion that great consequences ensued from the way a country managed its theater."

¹⁶ Fischer-Lichte (2005) 97–121, "The Soviet mass spectacles, 1917–1920."

¹⁷ The didactic and political purposes to which theater has been put seem endless. On Napoleon's theatrical reforms, see Lecomte (1912); colonial theater in what was then called Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Kaarsholm (1990); theater as a tool for moral pedagogy in Canada, Basourakos (1998).

¹⁸ E.g. Plato, *Laws* 660a, 817a–d. See now the study of theater in Plato's *Laws* by Prauscello (2014).

Aristophanes characterized playwrights as the teachers of the city.¹⁹ Ancient sources record tyrants encouraging the early development of theater.²⁰ More general studies on tyranny in the ancient world have recognized that theater often developed under the auspices of a tyrant.²¹ Theater and tyranny are frequently found together in both the ancient and modern world.

The recognition of theater's susceptibility to political masters encourages the reconsideration of the social forces that allowed, or encouraged, the development of theater in Sicily. Since theater so often engages a group audience and presents its story to a crowd, rather than to a single viewer, it requires a collaborative effort to be successful, but this does not mean that it necessarily expresses a collective or popular point of view.

1.1 Sicily's Network

The very different conditions that obtained in Sicily are not simply an interesting example of the widespread phenomenon of Panhellenic interest in Attic drama; Sicily's political and cultural situation also determined the characteristics, selection, and variety of plays on offer. The island of Sicily is, thus, not an arbitrary geographical boundary for this history. Rather, the boundaries of ancient Sicily identify an ancient context in which we can see a particular strand of the development of Greek theater, and a tradition created under particular conditions to serve a variety of specific masters and audiences.

Irad Malkin has recently argued that old models of center and periphery are not as useful for the study of Greek colonization as they once were.²² His evocative image of Greeks around the Mediterranean looking in and towards each other, in contrast with the Roman Empire in which Rome was the center spreading its influence out to the rest of the Mediterranean, is tellingly drawn from Plato himself.²³ In antiquity, the Athenians were well aware of the complex networks of literary and artistic development that, together with trade of more practical materials, crisscrossed the

¹⁹ E.g. Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1008–9.

²⁰ E.g. Herodotus (5.67) on Kleisthenes, tyrant of Sikyon ca 570 BCE, who is said to have instituted tragic choruses in honor of Dionysus; (Pseudo) Plato, *Hipparchos* 228 b–c. Cf. Csapo (1995) 103–4.

²¹ Ghiron-Bistagne (1976) 173–4 notes that it is almost invariably under tyrants that theater develops, for they use it as a tool to align themselves with the people against the aristocracy from whose ranks they are attempting to rise.

²² Malkin (2011); see also Hall (2012) 19–34. ²³ Malkin (2011) 15; Plato *Phaedo* 109b.

Mediterranean enriching each city's culture with infusion of ideas from other Greek cities and, indeed, from outside the Greek world. In this vein, Eric Csapo's new argument that, from at least the fourth century, Greek theater was thought of as a common cultural possession by Greeks throughout the Mediterranean is persuasive and appealing. Whereas modern scholars once imagined Greek theater to have evolved rather like a tree with its roots in Athens only later spreading out to the far reaches of the Mediterranean, Csapo's reassessment allows us to see how other cities contributed to its development and, eventually, could claim a stake in it. In this way, network theory and patterns of de-centralized development in antiquity must apply, in some ways, to the development of ancient Greek theater.

Although the work of Csapo, Malkin, and others opens many new horizons, there are limits to the usefulness of the network-based, collaborative model of cultural development in thinking about ancient theater, and particularly the theater of Greek Sicily. First, developed in the wake of the computer age and drawing very much on the structure of the internet and the much more connected world that the internet has brought about, this model can, deceptively, I think draw us into investigating ancient drama as if it were the drama, or even movies and television, of our own day (a). Secondly, it seems to me that the model does not take enough account of ancient interest in regional traditions, particularly Sicilian, and, later, Roman interest in commemorating and celebrating Sicilian traditions of theater (b).²⁴

(a) *Internet and networks*

As New Historicism has, of course, made clear, our own historical situation inevitably influences our understanding of the past. Network theory's dependence on the internet and modern ease of travel and exchange and the blindness of our own age is perhaps simply like the influence of any other modern situation upon our theories of the past.²⁵ An *ad hominem* scuffle that began in the larger academic world of the history of Greek colonization has left its mark on recent scholarship on theater outside Athens. The charge was first laid at the feet of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British that they read ancient Greek colonization through the lens of their own

²⁴ See also Boshier (2013a).

²⁵ New Historicism, a flexible form of cultural materialism, is usually said to have been founded as a theory of cultural analysis by Greenblatt (1980). Malkin (2011) 9–10.

empire.²⁶ Italians have likewise been accused of a distorting nationalism that rendered them biased in their judgment of relations between old Greece and Italy and Sicily.²⁷ Natives of New Zealand and Australia were suspected of reading Sicilian and South Italian theatrical vases through the rose-tinted glasses of their own postcolonial experience;²⁸ a charge disputed a few years ago by another New Zealander.²⁹ “Isms,” particularly postcolonialism and postmodernism, may also have sparked unfounded enthusiasm and led scholars astray.³⁰ As a Canadian, whose “embarrassingly gradual path to independence,” is a standing joke among our neighbors to the south, I might be wearing my own particular blinkers.³¹ A postcolonial viewpoint, for example, may inform my own reading of the evidence of “postcolonial” South Italy and Sicily, and my interest in discerning regional traditions may be suspect.

In contradistinction to these national and local biases, however, I suggest that a particularly insidious modern influence that skews our understanding of the theater of earlier periods is constituted by television, movies, and now increasingly the internet. It is insidious because its influence is so ubiquitous, crossing rather than accentuating cultural and national boundaries. The internationally available and dominant entertainment industry of Hollywood reaches the rest of the world in a way unimaginable before film.³² Our modern sense of the reach of popular theater and its daily intrusion into our lives through television and the internet may affect how we understand the spread of popular theater in other periods, including ancient Greece. Does the use of Hollywood, or America, as a reference point for the magnitude of some aspect of the ancient theater industry inevitably conjure an exaggerated picture of an international and relatively undifferentiated reception of theater in antiquity?³³ Hollywood, and American movie and television culture more generally, infiltrate the lives

²⁶ For a recent set of discussions, see Hurst and Owen (2005). Owen (2005) 5, “it has become something of a truism to state that past studies of Greek ‘colonization’ have been influenced by, or even based upon, the colonial experience of Britain and other Western European nations [...],” with citations.

²⁷ Taplin (1993) 53. ²⁸ Taplin (1993) 53. ²⁹ Robinson (2004) 207, n. 89.

³⁰ Csapo (2010) 38.

³¹ *This American Life*, “Who’s Canadian?” originally aired 30 May, 1997, by Sarah Vowel.

³² Hollywood and other national film collections were already well established and widely accessible by the time Webster proposed the dominant influence of Attic drama in the West in 1948; during the lifetime of the prolific German archaeologist who published many of the South Italian theatrical vases, Heinrich Heydemann (1842–1889), by comparison, the moving picture industry was yet to come.

³³ E.g. Csapo (2010) 87; Boshier (2006) 194; Csapo (2004) 57.

of many in other countries, particularly English speakers, in an ordinary, daily way. Huge posters advertising the latest Hollywood flick can be seen on the street in London, Paris, Rome, and no doubt in most small towns; these signs, and the movies they advertise, are not remarkable or extraordinary.³⁴ The showing of American movies is not an important social event; rather, movies are widely available and, in most places, inexpensive entertainment.

It may, therefore, be pertinent to reflect how difficult and costly it was to travel to see theater or for theater troupes to travel to perform on tour in the ancient Greek world. Stories of early poets and performers traveling to the West are redolent of adventure and danger. The great wealth that might be gained from such trips to the wealthy city of Syracuse is juxtaposed with the uncertainties and dangers of travel in, for example, the story of Arion and the dolphins.³⁵ From the later period of the Peloponnesian War, Plutarch's tale of Athenian prisoners freed if they recited Euripides speaks not only to the popularity of the great tragedian, but also, perhaps, to the rarity of performance of Attic drama even in Syracuse.³⁶ Likewise, Hughes supposes that it might have been too difficult for traveling troupes to reach Paestum and that the painters of comic vases there painted remembered performances from Sicily or even imagined scenes.³⁷ It is interesting to consider that tales of tragedians traveling abroad often end in their deaths, not as a result of the journey itself, of course, but nevertheless suggesting that such travel was so difficult and arduous that it quite often ended in a permanent move, rather than being a return journey (Euripides in Macedon, Aeschylus, and perhaps even Phrynichus in Sicily).³⁸ Although the

³⁴ Compare Trendall (1990) 228 on a tragic vase that would have made a "splendid poster" announcing the play. Though vase-paintings, of course, could be created in duplicate or even by the dozen, they could not, like modern posters, be run off on a printing press by the thousands or hundreds of thousands. They did not get passed around by email to millions of viewers. This is obvious, and Trendall is not claiming that they were, but our instinctive interpretation of an ancient image in light of a modern, mass-produced image may lead us to subconsciously overestimate the dissemination of ancient images and of plays.

³⁵ Hdt. 1.23–4.

³⁶ Although this may be due to the hostilities between Athens and Syracuse, it also suggests the relative paucity of productions in the West at this time which may be due to the difficulty of bringing performers from an enemy city or from such great distance. (Plut. *Vit. Nic.* 29; Satyr. *Vit. Eur. POxy.* 9.1176 ed. Hunt, fr. 39 col. XIX 11 = Kannicht 189 a–b). See p. 16, n. 7.

³⁷ Hughes (2003).

³⁸ Euripides (e.g. *Epigr. Sepulc. AP*, 7, 45=Kannicht 121, Satyr. *Vit. Eur. POxy.* 9.1176 ed. Hunt fr. 39 col. XX 22–XXI=Kannicht 122, Diod. Sic. 13.103.5=Kannicht 123, and others collected in Kannicht); Phrynichus (e.g. Anon. *De com.* 9 p. 7 Kost. = PCG 7, T2). The Phrynichus in question may be the comic one, Harvey (2000) 114–15. The details recorded in the *Lives of the Poets* are suspect (Lefkowitz 1981), but, as a group, they give some record of received views.

traveling players of the Actors of Dionysus guilds are not likely to have sprung up *ex nihilo*, our records for their formal association date to after Alexander the Great.³⁹ These small indices, scattered though they are, may suggest that the difficulties of travel would promote the development of regional touring groups, or even of local city players.⁴⁰ At the very least, I think we must be wary of imputing Hollywood-like influence to Athenian drama: Attic drama must have come to the West, as to other regions, but when it did performances must have been exciting and notable social and dramatic events.

(b) *Regions and origins*

Throughout this book, I tackle the second problem of a regional tradition of Sicilian theater and attempt to make the case for it. I argue that it is a tradition defined partly by the content or origin of its plays, but also by their role and appearance in Sicilian society, their reception and reflection in Sicilian art, and their place in the political history of the island.

This effort to distinguish how Sikeliotes and native Sicilians created, thought about, and were influenced by theater is confused by a peculiarly philological instinct to define genres of drama by the evidence of the extant literary texts of plays and to trace traditions back to their origins, and preferably to distinct and autonomous origins in text, cult, society, etc. It is not possible, however, as far as I can tell, to create an accurate stemma of Sicilian theater, even allowing for many complexities. Although a good case can be made for Epicharmus as an originator of comedy, as many ancient authors, including Aristotle, do,⁴¹ and although the argument has been made that Sicilian comedy evolved out of cult rituals in honor of Demeter,⁴² this kind of hunt for a historical origin of Sicilian comedy is not my purpose here. Rather, my aim is to collect and examine the disparate evidence for the social and political relevance of theater, both home-grown and Attic, in Sicily. Ancient arguments and celebrations of Epicharmus' role as the inventor of comedy are important as indications of the Sikeliotes' view of their theater and of their pride in it, rather than of some kind of historical origin of comedy, or even Sicilian comedy, in the fragments of Epicharmus.

³⁹ Hugoniot, Hurllet and Milanezi (2004) 11; see Csapo (2004) for discussion of the development of the acting profession; Le Guen (2001) 317, dates the first inscription commemorating the actors of Dionysus in Sicily to the second or the very beginning of the first century B.C.E.

⁴⁰ On traveling theater troupes from Athens, see Lightfoot (2002) and now Taplin (2012) 226–50.

⁴¹ Aristotle *Poetics* 1449b 5–7. ⁴² See Chapter 3.