

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY  
OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 7: Contexts  
of Greek Drama:

Greek Tragedy:

Aeschylus,  
Sophocles and  
Euripides

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# Theatre of Dionysos, Athens



# Theatre at Epidauros

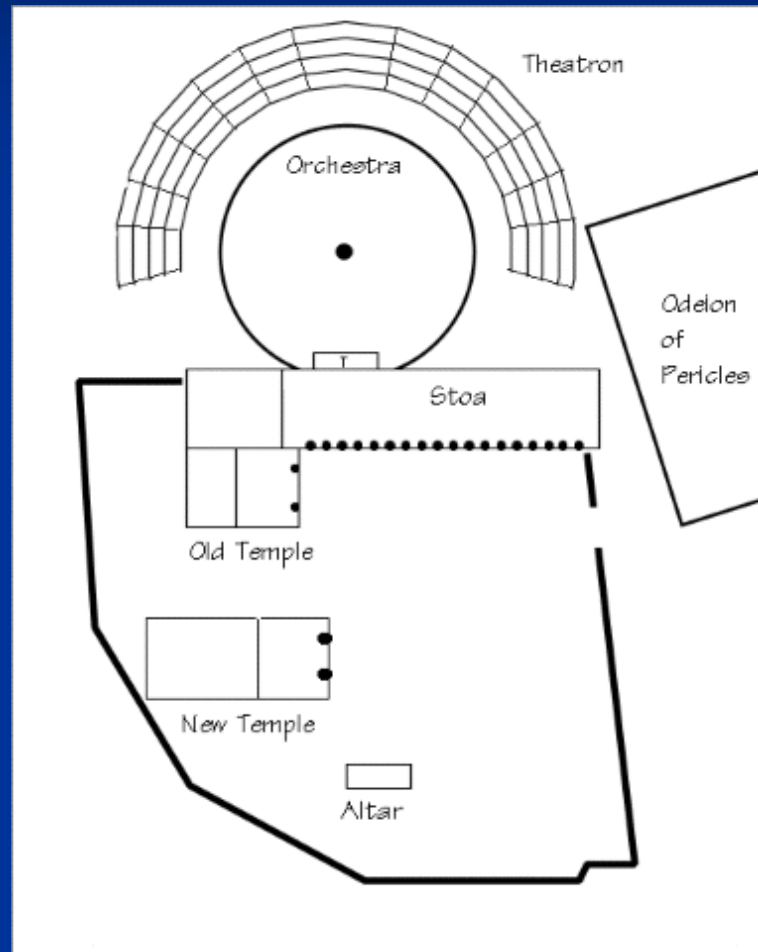


Brett Walton 2003

# Modern performance in theatre at Epidauros



# Theatre and sanctuary of Dionysos, Athens



# Theatre of Dionysos, Athens: Hypothetical reconstruction of the earliest theatre with square wooden benches



# Athenian Dramatic Festivals

- Competitive Context: Each festival involved a competition between the dramas for the prize; community context.
- Religious Context of the performance of drama: at religious festivals in honour of the god Dionysus:
  - 1/ City Dionysia in Elaphebolion = springtime, March.
  - 2/ Lenaia, in January - fewer plays .
  - 3/ Rural Dionysia, mostly in winter/December:

productions, and therefore some form of theatre or at least open space with seating - in certainly 15 demes, probably more, but surely not all the 139 demes – they put on repeat productions of popular plays. Further opportunities for troupes of actors – how they did the choruses very unclear.

# Contexts: Political

## Audience

- Large (6,000-14,000)
- Citizens and metics
- Women and children?
- Allies and foreigners
- Prisoners
- Sacrifice
- Pompe (procession)
- Seating
- Ceremonies of Proagon:
- Public praise
- Parade of war orphans
- Presentation of tribute by allies.

# Contexts: Political

- Sponsored and Funded by Athens
- Eponymous Archon (magistrate)
- Chooses poets competing (summer before festival)
- Assigned actors and *Choregos* (Athenian)
- Prizes for writer/director, *Choregos* and actor paid for by city
- Sacrifices and theatre paid for by city
- Theoric Fund

# Origins: Religious and Political

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a: *Tragedy develops:*

- Poets turn to Tragedy instead of Epic
- “from those who led the dithyramb.”
- “from something rather satyric.”

## Dates

- Tragedy c. 534:
- Thespis and Cultural programmes
- Satyr-Drama c. 501
- Origins of the Democracy
- Comedy c. 486

# Tragedy and Democracy

## Chorus

- 10-12 Athenian males spared military service.
- Women, old men, slaves, foreigners.
- Collective personalities; gives background information; articulates general truths of the culture; ...
- Destruction of the Aristocratic Household?

# Greek Tragedy: Overview

- Earliest extant play: 472BC [Aeschylus' *Persae*]
  - Aeschylus [c.525/4-c.456/5BC]
  - Sophocles [c.497/6-406BC]
  - Euripides [c.485/4-c.406BC]
- 4<sup>th</sup> Century plays
  - Only fragmentary remains
  - Revivals of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides

5<sup>th</sup> Century Athens

# Tragedy and Politics

- Phrynichus' *Fall of Miletus*:
- “when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled *The Fall of Miletus* and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally, and forbade the performance of that play forever.”

Herodotus 6.21.2

# Tragedy and Politics

- Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, 289-91
  - So now with a pure mouth I piously invoke Athena, lady of this land, to come to my aid. Without the spear, she will win me and my land and the Argive people [290] as faithful and true allies for all time.
- Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 28-30
  - And the flaming god, the malign plague, has swooped upon us, and ravages the town: he lays waste to the house of Cadmus, but enriches Hades with [30] groans and tears.
- Euripides' *Trojan Women*

# Athens in Tragedy

- Aeschylus' *Eumenides*
  - Trial on Acropolis
  - Athenian propaganda
  - Importance of law-court / justice



# Self through Other: Women

## ■ Tragic Wives and Mothers

- For there was no mother who gave me birth; and in all things, except for marriage, whole-heartedly I am for the male and entirely on the father's side. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 735-6

## ■ Tragic Virgins

- "O Argives, who have sacked my city! of my free will I die; let none lay hand on me; for bravely will I yield my neck. [...] hearing her captors' words took her robe and tore it open from the shoulder to the waist, displaying a breast and bosom fair as a statue's ... Euripides, *Hecuba*



# Self through Other: the Barbarian



# Tragedy and the gods

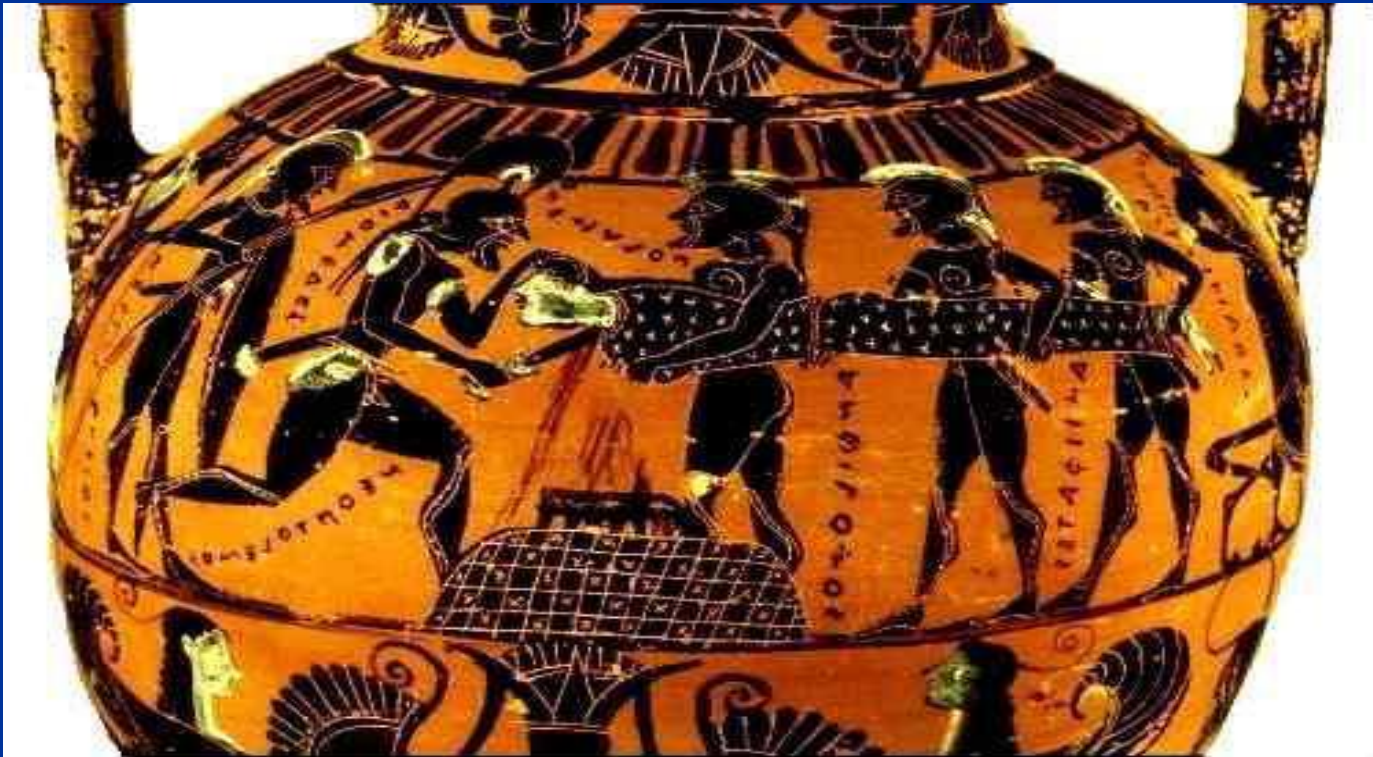
- Power of the Gods:            Specific: Erinyes, Apollo, Athena, Zeus
- Social:
  - I may be a slave and weak as well, but the gods are strong, and Custom too which prevails over them, [800] for by custom it is that we believe in them and set up boundaries of right and wrong for our lives. Now if this principle, when referred to you, is to be set at nothing, and they are to escape punishment who murder guests or dare to plunder the temples of gods, [805] then all fairness in human matters is at an end. Euripides, *Hecuba*, 798-805
- Religious Aetiologies:
  - □ So yield to my persuasion and do not hurl the words of a reckless tongue against the land, [830] that all things bearing fruit will not prosper. Calm the black wave's bitter anger, since you will receive proud honours and will live with me. And when you have the first-fruits of this great land forever, offerings on behalf of children and of marriage rites, [835] you will praise my counsel. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 827-35

# Tragedy and the gods

## ■ Questioning the Gods

- O Zeus! what can I say? that your eye is over man? or that we hold this opinion all to no purpose, [490] falsely thinking there is any race of gods, when it is chance that rules the mortal sphere? Was not this the queen of wealthy Phrygia, the wife of Priam highly blessed? And now her city is utterly overthrown by the foe, ... Euripides, *Hecuba*, 488-94

# Questions?



# Follow-up Reading

- All of the articles in the following collections are useful; however, those articles chosen for follow up reading relate to the Politics of Theatre. Feel free to explore the other articles at your leisure.
- Gregory, J. *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Malden: Mass, 2005, pp.321-76, pp. 3-22.
- Winkler, J. J. and Zeitlin, F. I. *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 97-129.

# Preliminary Reading

- For this afternoon, please read Euripides' *Bacchae*.
- For next week, please read:
- Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*,  
[<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text;jsessionid=D7A806390A1C9BAAEAE5BCCBA146E300?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0242>]
- Menander, *The Woman from Samos*
- Whilst reading, try to get a sense of the relationships between Comedy and society and politics and between (and differences between) Comedy and Tragedy. Also consider how and why Comedy speaks out to its audience.