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Ancient theatre and performance culture

Definitions and methods

Aristotle's definition of tragedy may seem odd to modern viewers for whom psychological drama is the norm:

'Tragedy is a representation (*mimêsis*), not of people, but of an action (*praxis*) . . . They do not act so as to represent character (*êthê*) but they include character on account of the actions' (*Poetics* 1450a20–23).¹

Yet the formulation deserves renewed attention in light of the advances made by critics and theorists in the last few decades. Tragedy – and, we might say, drama as a whole – is primarily about *action*. Aristotle's own reference to the etymology of the Greek word *drama* (from the verb *dran*, 'act, do') asserts this in another way, although he simply includes the suggestion in his report on possible non-Athenian origins for theatrical activity (*Poetics* 1448a30–38).

To say that tragedy, comedy and satyr play are actions is not to deny that they are also masterpieces of verbal artistry. For readers since late antiquity, it is as texts that these dramas have most often been encountered. Well into the twentieth century, the fascination and power of Greek plays have been found in their textual qualities, whether imagery, rhetoric, sound or structure. (The comparative undervaluation of Roman drama in the twentieth century stems from this fixation, abetted by New Criticism and related interpretive modes.) At the same time, however, the increasingly fruitful rediscovery of classical drama as live performance, starting in the late nineteenth century, has generated a body of valuable work, by scholars and producers, on stagecraft, spectacle, the actor's body, masking, the meaning and use of space and other features of theatre beyond the purely verbal. In part, this trend has led to a renewed interest in Aristotle's wider view of drama: he, too, was well aware that spectacle (*opsis*) and song and dance (*melopoia*) were components of live Greek theatre (*Poetics* 1449b31–36), although he

thought them ultimately dispensable. In another way, the trend has made room for, if not encouraged, a different way of treating ‘action’ in ancient drama, which we can call the anthropological – while acknowledging that linguistics, sociology, folkloristics and studies of cognition also support it. Aristotle might be thought the progenitor of this approach, as well, if we feel the need to find ancient authority – but the Aristotle of the *Rhetoric* and *Politics*, the philosopher concerned with the effect of actions on daily life. Using such an approach, this essay will pursue the inter-relationship between staged plays and other forms of social action, in order to show how an appreciation of ‘actions’ outside the theatre enriches the understanding of the action (*drama*) which constituted ancient theatre.

Right away, two problems confront us. First, how do we recover a ‘native’ sense (the anthropologists’ ‘emic’ definition) of the category of social action? Can we simply inventory all the phenomena connected with the Greek verbs *dran* or *poiein* (‘to make’, root of ‘poetry’), or *telein* (‘make complete; perform a rite’), or the Latin *facere* and *agere* (which give us ‘fact’ and ‘act’)? Or are we forced to fall back on an ‘etic’ sense, imposing our own common-sense ideas about significant acts? An awareness of cultural differences is crucial.

We might, for instance, believe that washing one’s hands is a trivial, private matter, of social concern only when involving doctors or restaurant workers. Yet one of our earliest Greek texts specifically surrounds this ordinary act with ritual prohibitions regarding its performance:

Do not at dawning pour the shining wine with unwashed hands to Zeus and other immortals . . .

Who ever crosses a river with unwashed hands and wickedness angers the gods, and they give him pains thereafter. (Hesiod *Works and Days*, 724–5, 740–1)

One can easily find in Greek tragedy occurrences of hand-washing in a marked or implicitly ritual context. Such acts within the stylized medium of drama pose interpretative questions. In the *Persians* of Aeschylus (472), the barbarian queen tells the chorus how she ‘touched the fair-watered stream’ before sacrificing to ward off the bad omens of her dreams (lines 201–2). Knowing that this action is significant within the traditions of Greek religious practice might lead an audience to see Atossa as a more sympathetic character, or the Persian royal use of a familiar custom as ironic (unless this is simply a projection of the playwright’s own environment onto the erstwhile enemy of his city-state). What counts is that an action, known to be culturally significant, has been cited and embedded in another, larger cultural act: the drama itself. The semantics and conventions attached to the smaller gesture have an impact, beyond words, when reproduced in the

larger space of the theatre, given the sensitivity of the viewers about such actions. The practical result of studying these smaller gestures and actions should be that our translations and re-stagings of ancient drama focus attention on such moments and relate them (in the actor's words and movements, and in staging) to other significant moments and images (e.g. washing of the corpse, or aspersion of a sacred space, as in Ion's cleansing of Apollo's temple at the opening of Euripides' *Ion*). We should no longer treat them as ordinary but put virtual quotation marks around them. The search for natively 'significant' action inevitably draws one into the study of history, archaeology and semantics, the academic specialties that seek to visualize precise social contours of an ancient culture through identifying its primary signifiers and their force-fields.

The second problem haunts two of the terms just mentioned: 'ritual' and 'performance', words notoriously over-extended in current parlance. 'Performance' can apply to anything from automobiles to athletes. 'Ritual' crops up in descriptions of religious occasions, New Age happenings and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Critics of ancient drama need definitions that retain some of this broad flexibility of usage while focusing more on occasions for social enactment. In this connection, the summary by the folklorist Richard Bauman proves useful: 'performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience'.²

The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah, meanwhile, provides a workable definition of 'ritual' that can clarify dramatic contexts:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition).³

In this light, ritual is a more tightly bounded subset of the larger area of 'performance'. Both depend on the notion of communicative acts directed toward an audience of one or more onlookers, and both are marked out in some way from ordinary processes of communication. We might want to contrast the two in terms of relative emphasis on aesthetic enjoyment versus functional power (the difference between a poem and a magic spell); but a striking feature of Greek and Roman cultures is the way these aspects are often merged. More beautiful, aesthetically appealing prayer or sacrifice is thought to be more effective; for this reason song and dance accompany offerings, and the horns of the sacrificial bull are wrapped in gold. With these definitions in mind, we can narrow slightly the range of phenomena that one

must keep in mind when interpreting such alien art forms as Greek tragedy. Yet we are also made immediately conscious that, alongside theatre, Greek and Roman societies, at various times, contained many more opportunities for highly visible ‘performances’ than do highly privatized modern industrial societies. In a Mediterranean climate, with a high proportion of life lived outdoors and at close quarters, what might seem to us histrionic becomes the norm for social behaviour. It is not inaccurate to refer to fifth-century Athens and second to first-century BC Rome as ‘performance’ cultures, if by that we mean groupings where being seen to *act* – whether in assembly, senate, military, the forum or the agora – was a key component of social identity for members of certain classes. The ‘performance’ rubric enables us to combine the analysis of theatre, on the one hand, and oratory, civic spectacles or many related acting formats, on the other. The universe of discourse expands, multiplying the possibilities for interpretation.

Another way to put this would be to see performance itself as a subset within an even wider area, that of social interaction. But then how do we keep the study of ancient drama from spreading out indefinitely into analyses of entire cultures? Or, is that not the goal? Greek and Roman plays offer a crystallization of those cultures, enabling us to investigate many other facets. To study them as performances means to enter deeply into all the performance realms that surround them. But then what practical methods and categorizations can produce interpretative results from the insight that theatrical art and social life form a seamless web? The following examples are an attempt to stake out a few areas and suggest modes of investigation.

Personal performances

The sociologist Erving Goffman, using dramaturgy as a model, called attention to the ‘presentation of self’ in everyday life.⁴ When we meet others, we stage ourselves. But if one’s interactions with others can be read as theatrical – as requiring rehearsal, arrangement, selection of details, attention to audience, expressive stylization and so forth – then theatre in a sort of geometrical progression is a drama of self-dramatizations. This means that it would be conceivable to study any given ancient play by segmenting the drama into its constituent social interactions, and to treat each of these as a mini-drama in itself, with a successful or failed outcome. Such a fine-grained observational technique might single out charged interactions such as first encounters, or attempts at persuasion. A famous scene involving both types marks the triumphal return of Agamemnon after the destruction of Troy. Clytemnestra addresses her husband, but plays at the same time to an internal audience, the chorus of Argive elders (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 855–913).

The speech in which she dramatizes her years of loneliness and anxiety shifts at the end to become a torrent of praise for the hero (897–8: ‘saving forestay of a ship, roof-pillar, a father’s only son’). The skill and force of her rhetorical self-presentation up to this point prepares the audience for the next stage, when she persuades Agamemnon, despite his religious caution, to enter his palace by treading a luxurious purple carpet (914–74). His willingness to do so is a symptom, not a cause, of his downfall, a sign of his malleability. The poet explicitly frames it as a defeat for him and victory for his wife (940–3). Ironically, Clytemnestra’s victory is itself a poetic *tour de force*, an enactment of vivid imagination and striking imagery (e.g. 958–74: the sea of purple dye; the tree that wards off heat; the vintage). In terms of personal performance, she is at this moment more like an Aeschylus, and her audience (persuaded, by words, of the reality of a fiction) more like the crowd in the theatre itself. The playwright immediately undercuts this riveting individual self-performance with a communal performance, marking a less than successful act of persuasion, as the chorus dance and sing of their abiding anxieties (975–1033). But the impression of Clytemnestra’s outsized character remains uppermost. It is worth noting that typically for Greek drama – and unlike the indirection found in realistic or psychological theatre – characterization here is a matter of *personae* speaking out in an agonistic setting, attempting to convince an interlocutor in front of an audience (the chorus). Almost every major figure in Greek tragedy and comedy has such encounters. This configuration can be seen as archetypal, not only for theatre, but for the presentation of heroes in epic (a forerunner of Greek drama). It also structures the related performances of self in symposium, court and assembly, which we will examine below.

Persons and traditions

A slightly more complex form of social interaction triangulates the actor, the audience and a shared body of knowledge about how one should speak and act. In this configuration, the performer not only does or says something; his performance is judged in relation to many previous such acts. Greek athletics and the related phenomenon of hero tales encourage the urge to *compare* performances: is a Theseus up to the level of a Heracles, or this year’s pankration winner as good as the victor at the previous Olympic games? On a practical level, ancient playwrights, often by overt reference to earlier or contemporary plays, exploit the possibilities inherent in audience awareness of other performances. A well-known example comes in Euripides’ *Electra*, which alludes, in its recognition scene, to the *Libation-Bearers* of Aeschylus. The multiple repeated titles in lists of dramas no longer extant show the

effect of the competitive atmosphere in which Greek theatre operated. Every new *Philoctetes* or *Lemnian Women* was an opportunity to parody, subvert or outshine another's version. That comedy and the satyr play could also offer refractions of tragic plots made the audience all the more attuned to pointed allusion.

On a smaller scale, within the dramas rather than in the dramatic production milieu, a personal relationship to verbal tradition could be represented and used for characterization. Again, recognizing this aspect requires us to think more broadly about performance. Recent work by folklorists has drawn attention to the 'performance' in everyday life of certain communicative genres (tales, gossip, personal history narratives, proverbs, etc.). This work has predecessors in linguistics and semiotics, which in turn bring it closer to the study of drama. The Czech literary theorist Jan Mukarovsky referred to the dialogization of texts in which proverbs, representing anonymous voices from outside the present space and time, have intervened. In his memorable phrase, 'proverbial allusions are equivalent to the theatricalization of an utterance'.⁵

While personal performances (as Clytemnestra's) might rely on a number of devices, the decision to have a dramatic figure utter a proverb raises the stakes for characterization because, by definition, the audience is already ahead of the performer; it knows the proper use and intent of the utterances, and its knowledge adjusts the asymmetry between a persuasive rhetorician and passive auditors.

Aristotle indicates an awareness that proverbs are good for displaying opinion and character. In the *Rhetoric* he defines the term *gnômê* as 'A showing forth (*apophansis*) not of particular things such as what sort of a man a certain Iphicrates is – but in general; and not about everything – such as straight is opposite to curved – but about all that has to do with actions (*praxeis*) and what is to be chosen or avoided with regard to action'. Given his comments on action in the *Poetics*, we might say that the *gnômê* is a kernel form of drama, a verbal directive that might blossom into a plot. Aristotle (*Rhet.* 2.21.2) even cites an example from Euripides' *Medea*. In the passage Jason has already informed his wife of his new alliance with the daughter of Creon. When the new father-in-law comes to order Medea out of Corinth he calls her *sophê* – 'clever' or 'wise'.

She replies (lines 292–3): 'This is not the first time, Creon; often my reputation has harmed me and done great evils.' A proverbial expression now comes into play as a transition from her recollection of previous experiences. 'No sound-minded man should ever have his children well taught to be overly clever' (*sophous*, 295). The full elaboration of Medea's gnomic utterance continues (298–9): 'If you put new, smart things before the eyes of

fools, you'll appear useless and not wise' (*ou sophos* – the masculine adjective at this point is ambiguous and can also refer to her interlocutor, Creon). She herself must endure this fate, 'for being wise, to some, I am an object of jealousy, to others I am irksome. But I am not so very wise' (*sophê*, 305). In fact, her ironic repetitions and variations of this small theme persuade us by the end of the scene that she *is* much wiser than anyone else in the drama, and that they will suffer for it. Ironically, too, if Medea performs proverbs so proficiently, the audience for this play has to view her as an *expert* in Greek discourse, contrary to her self-presentation as helpless foreigner. In short, such performances of familiar non-dramatic genres within drama provide an audience with a measure to judge the ethos of a staged figure.

Game, play, contest, education

As we have seen, from a performance perspective the landscape of everyday life outside the theatre is never flatly undramatic. Contours and prominences emerge from the activities of social 'actors' in a variety of settings. Thus it pays to take account of other activities involving heightened communication and display, all of which may have shaped stage drama, its performers and audiences.

A story was told in antiquity that Solon, the Athenian lawmaker of the sixth century BC, as an old man attended the first performances of Thespis, the legendary inventor of tragedy, in the days before drama competitions. After seeing the playwright acting in his own production, Solon angrily asked whether he was not ashamed to tell lies in front of audiences. When Thespis replied that it was all done in play, Solon responded that honouring this sort of play would lead to the breakdown of contracts (Plutarch, *Solon* 29). The lawmaker's fears about the negative effects of dramatic fiction foreshadow Plato's rejection of tragic mimesis generations later (*Rep.* 388–94). But the basic acknowledgement that drama is a type of 'play' (*paidia*) has a positive legacy, as well. Aristotle considered play an essential for relaxation and a good means of educating the young (*Politics* 1336a28–35; 1339b16–20), for whom it provided a way to imitate more serious adult pursuits – a view that may not be surprising, given his generally favourable attitude toward mimesis. Even Plato, who denigrated imitation, finds a place for orderly play in the ideal city of the *Republic*, where it serves as children's earliest education in rules (425a). By his last work, the *Laws*, play has become a model for existence: 'Each should live out life', says the Athenian in the dialogue, 'playing at certain forms of play (*paidias*) – sacrificing and singing and dancing – so as to be able to render the gods favourable to him and to defend himself against enemies and defeat them when he fights' (803e). It is

striking that three of the most important Greek aesthetic and ritual actions are thus regarded as forms of creative pleasure. It is likely that drama was implicitly regarded as another.

A broad spectrum analysis of ‘play’ would range from children’s imitative role-playing, through games for all ages, to competitive sports and performance contests. The last two categories, often occurring together, are fairly well documented, unlike the less formal and occasional activities. Yet an audience raised on children’s games like ‘king and donkeys’ (Plato *Theaetetus* 146a), or ‘night and day’ (Plato comicus fr. 152K), might well have detected the stylized patterns of these choose-and-chase games in dramatic stagings of royal power and its pitfalls, whether *Agamemnon*, *Bacchae*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone*. Group games not only initiated children into the basic theatrical format of individual responding to chorus; some (such as ‘tortoise’) also were accompanied by iambic verses (the dominant metre of dramatic speeches) alluding to gender roles and disaster:

- Q. Torty-tortoise, what are you doing in the middle?
 A. I am weaving wool and Milesian cloth.
 Q. What was your son doing when he died?
 A. Jumping from white horses into the sea.⁶

Playwrights were associated with other amusements. The tragedian Sophocles was known as an expert ball-player, a skill he exhibited when playing the role of the maiden Nausicaa in his *Pluntriaii*. A lucky throw of the knucklebones was called ‘Euripides’ – apparently from a pun on his name (‘Good-toss-son’), not from gambling skills.⁷ More seriously, it has been argued that adult board games, such as *pestoi*, helped to structure the archaic Greek imagination concerning space and power and mould a social consciousness of symbolic action – again, an important preparation for interpreting drama. The symposium, the ubiquitous male drinking party, and its accompanying *kômos* (often inebriated informal procession) provided opportunity for further fun. The frequent use of riddles as a sympotic pastime (Athenaeus 452) meant that many Athenians naturally had a keen interest in interpreting such puzzles as the Sphinx enigma underlying *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Phoenician Women*, and ambiguous Delphic oracles (cf. *Ion*, *Medea*). All these forms of play enriched the metaphorical texture of ancient drama.⁸ At the same time they reinforced awareness of the ‘zero-sum’ nature of social life, an attitude that must have nourished the theatre audience’s appreciation of the ‘play’ of fate and chance.

The historian Thucydides reports Pericles’ praise of the Athenian lifestyle: ‘We celebrate contests (*agônes*) and sacrifices (*thusiai*) all through the year’ (Thuc. 2.38.1). This coordination of activities that Plato later called ‘play’ is

significant, as is their marked frequency in the birthplace of drama, which was from at least the mid-sixth century BC organized as a competition.

The City Dionysia held yearly in early spring featured contests among three playwrights, each producing three tragedies and one satyr play, as well as a comic competition (with three or five dramatists involved).⁹ Prizes for first-, second- and third-place productions were awarded; the lead tragic actors (later, in the fourth century BC, the comic as well) also competed for honours. In the fifth century, the larger role of the non-professional chorusmen in all forms of drama made such contests more like team events. The same festival saw even larger numbers competing in a non-theatrical medium, the choral dithyramb. This event (from which no whole text survives) seems to have overshadowed drama in creating crowd passion, as two choruses (one of fifty men, the other fifty boys) represented each of ten Athenian tribes. With a thousand participants annually in the dithyrambs and another hundred or so in the plays, the state-sponsored drama competitions enjoyed an audience that was at once huge (perhaps fifteen thousand persons) and full of performance connoisseurs.

An analogy might be made with athletics, ancient and modern. Staged in crowded stadiums, like drama, the ancient variety were deeply embedded in ritual contexts. *Agônes* were a part of many local festivals that commemorated mythic heroes by projecting the spirit of conquest into the sphere of non-lethal sport. Events with a martial usefulness (running, javelin throwing, combat sports) appeared alongside *agônes* in lyre-playing, singing and even painting. As in the Dionysia, contest and religious worship coincided: the four major Panhellenic ('all-Greek') athletic festivals were dedicated to Zeus (Olympian and Nemean), Poseidon (Isthmian, at Corinth), and Apollo (Pythian, at Delphi). A fifth festival, the Greater Panathenaea, developed by Pisistratus at Athens about the same period as the organization of the Dionysia, included competitive recitation of Homer, but not dramas. Like the heroes whom they commemorated, winning athletes and musicians gained at these games a nearly religious aura and celebrity throughout Greece. Inscriptions, statues and poetry celebrated the gleam of victory. Euripides wrote the victory song for Alcibiades (Plutarch *Alc.* 11) – a reminder that the tropes of hero-cult, athletics and politics often converged.

Athletic 'performance' thus converges with Greek drama in heroic presentation. If athletes, in celebratory odes of Pindar and others, are figured as heroes, so mythic heroes can be staged as athletes, winning or losing. Herakles takes pride of place. He reports his struggle with Death, in the Euripidean *Alcestis*, in terms of *agônes*, with the recovered bride described as the victory prize (*Alc.* 1025–8). The spectacle of a powerful man struggling against crushing forces energizes and adds suspense to such plays as

Philoctetes, *Ajax*, *Hippolytus* and *Women of Trachis*; ‘agony’ not accidentally comes from the word for ‘competition’, and playwrights presented it with the gusto of sportscasters.

Performance skill was vital to the upbringing of young Greeks, especially males. *Gymnastikê* (physical training) and *mousikê* (poetry, song and dance) were the two components of traditional education. The *Clouds* of Aristophanes (423 BC) revolves around their contested relative valuation (see esp. lines 962ff.). His *Frogs*, perhaps in answer to the loss of tradition in a changing culture, asserted that drama itself educates state and citizens (cf. *Frogs* 1039–44, 1419–77). It is clear that older forms of song and dance, which were associated with group education, rituals and non-dramatic performance, provide the ultimate origin for choral and solo performance in tragedy, comedy and satyr play. The older forms are ‘sociopoetic’ inasmuch as their pre-dramatic usage played a key role in the operation of city-state institutions. Choruses, especially of young women, are attested in poetry and visual art from the very beginnings of Greek culture. One of the earliest lyric poetic texts (seventh century BC) represents a chorus of Spartan maidens engaged in a ritual to Artemis.¹⁰ Euripides alludes to similar ritual choruses at the Panathenaea (*Heracles* 781–3), ceremonies of the Great Mother (*Helen* 1338–68) and cult to Aphrodite and Hippolytus (*Hipp.* 1423–30), among others. For interpreting drama, the existence of such forms goes beyond speculation about genre origins to questions of audience reaction. To what extent did theatregoers treat choruses on stage, such as the women of Trachis, the Bacchantes worshipping Dionysus, or women celebrating the Thesmophoria, as ‘natural’? How were their reactions affected by their expectations about such groups in everyday life? The further complication that male chorusmen played such female choral roles must have foregrounded the stylized nature of the dramatic versions. Winkler’s suggestion that such male choruses were composed of young men serving as ephebes (aged between eighteen and twenty) links the educational function of actual non-dramatic groups with the broader civic role of fictionalized drama as it evolved in Athens.¹¹

Religious ritual

The performances of self mentioned in the first two sections above might be categorized, in terms from cognitive studies, as ‘routines’, predictable ways for handling events, that are ‘scripted’ only to the extent that they match broad expectations. A greeting, for example, does not employ the word ‘goodbye’, nor does hand-washing involve pouring of dirt (although Greek *chaire* can mean both hail and farewell, and certain encounter rituals, like supplications, do employ the symbolism of soiling the body). The communal

actions named in the third section (above) involve a different level of scripting and evaluation: how well did the body of social actors, whether in dance, procession, symposium or funeral lament, ‘perform’? Essentially, this is an aesthetic judgment. Similar critique could frame religious ritual (cf. Socrates’ aesthetic judgment about the Bendis celebration at Piraeus, *Rep.* 327a).

It would be heretical to claim that a more aesthetically pleasing Mass (to take an example) is also more effective as ritual action, despite the variety of liturgical styles. Ancient Greek rites, by contrast, pivot on the notion that a performance filled with charm, offering the best combination of song, music and dance, attracts divine favour all the more. Religious acts from the singing of hymns to the dedication of statues can be thought of as containing ‘grace’ or *charis*, which is then echoed in the gods’ reaction to them. This inherently reciprocal notion covers the semantic range of ‘grace’ and ‘charm’ but also ‘pleasure’ and ‘thanks’. One way of pinpointing the appearances of the notoriously slippery concept of ‘ritual’, it seems, would be to trace the usage of this crucial term, in extant dramas. The salient point is that such a concept blurs the line (largely a modern construct) between drama and ritual, aesthetic and effective actions.

Whatever drama’s genetic ties to ritual, the two are contiguous in Athens because the primary theatrical event, the Dionysia, was a religious festival.¹² Was every staged action therefore somehow dedicated to the god of theatre? Even if we had explicit evidence to suggest this, the gains for interpretation would still be questionable. More fruitful investigations examine the relationships among dramatic festivals and other large-scale ritualized performance events (like the Panathenaea); the logic of ritual actions within a single play or trilogy (for instance the movement from sacrifice to lament to procession in the *Oresteia*); or the associative resonances set up through allusions to ritual gestures and vocabulary.

If ritualized behaviour implies actions in which formality and proper sequence are heightened, to counteract social breakdown, then perhaps the most important way in which ritual occurs in drama is as foil and fantasy. Stylized theatrical versions of rites complement the actual forms, as a tool for making thematic parallels, for compressing time-frames and for suggesting change, through an apparently unchanging medium. The comedies of Aristophanes provide numerous examples. The *Acharnians* (425), produced in the midst of the Peloponnesian War, plays on the ambiguity of ritual *spondai* (meaning ‘libations’ and by metonymy ‘treaty’) to imagine its protagonist as possessing the liquid essence of a separate peace. When Dicaeopolis celebrates with his own private Dionysus procession at home, he further transgresses, since the Rural Dionysia was a communal rite – not just a matter of a single household. Yet scholars have regularly taken the

scene in which Dicaeopolis tells his slave how to hold up the model phallus, and instructs his daughter on the niceties of basket-bearing (*Ach.* 241–79), as a snapshot of actual ritual. Subsequent ‘rituals’ in the *Acharnians* should make one less positive, especially as they are jammed together in theatrical time. The Rural Dionysia (occurring throughout Attica in December) is presented in a play actually produced at the Lenaea festival (early January), while the main struggle between Dicaeopolis and the *miles gloriosus* figure of Lamachus plays out as the distinctive drinking contest associated with the citywide ritual of the Anthesteria, which took place during three days each February. As it collapses three of the four Dionysus theatre festivals, so too the *Acharnians* elides the location of its performances, the theatre of Dionysus on the slope of the Acropolis, with the place for drinking on the festival day *Choes* (‘cups’), probably near the river Ilissus, a mile or so to the south. Dramatically, the misplaced rituals provide a substructure that induces a no doubt familiar mood in the theatre audience: the modern equivalent of putting on stage such celebrations as New Orleans Carnival or New Year’s Eve parties.

We might contrast this with the technique of alluding to or borrowing from a particular pre-existing script. The first lines of the *Persians* of Aeschylus (472) modify slightly the opening of an earlier play by Phrynichus (as the ancient scholarly tradition noted) and for Aeschylus’ audience, it seems this was made meaningful by the subsequent *change* in dramatic handling (Phrynichus’ play revealed the *Persians*’ loss right away, while the news is suspensefully delayed in the version by Aeschylus). But the familiar ‘text’ of the *Choes* drinking ritual is more amorphous, less scripted than a dramatic rendition; to allude to it involves a different sort of technique and a different cognitive process on the part of the audience. Yet both ‘scriptural’ and ritual borrowings are resources for enhancing the emotional impact of theatre, and it may well be that the former grew out of the community’s long experience with the latter.

Performing in the *polis*

Gender and ethnicity depend on incremental, interactive display: how one dresses, walks, speaks, gestures, builds or decorates. Staged drama partakes of such self-dramatization at the level of the individual, but also of the Athenian *polis*, the city-state of approximately forty thousand citizen males and 150,000 others (slaves, women, children, resident foreigners).¹³ Drama provided the space for interpreting and disseminating a version of the history of Athens (as in the *Persians*), but more importantly, its ideology. Plays such as *Ion*, *Erechtheus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Women in Assembly* and

Euripides' *Suppliants* presented an image of an autochthonous, exclusive society that was also a divinely protected, hospitable and democratic state.

The delicate political negotiation enacted by tragedy and comedy in Athens was framed by the city-state's contemporary institutions – especially the assembly (*ekklêsia*), council (*boulê*) and courts – all of which both borrowed from and contributed to theatrical performance. Not only comedy (*Acharnians*, *Women in Assembly*) but also tragedy, more subtly, regularly acknowledges the existence of a parallel space, the Pnyx (a few hundred yards south-west of the Athenian theatre) in which impassioned debate and audience judgement also took place. As with ritual, what matters is the complementarity of these performance arenas. Actual decisions (such as the enslavement of Melos, or the expedition to Sicily of 415) can be explored in theatrical form (in e.g. *Trojan Women*, *Birds*) behind the scrim of myth. The fictional curses and blessings of a Hecuba or Athena might express broader political feeling, even though they do not directly bring it to bear on events.

At the heart of democracy was rhetoric, the art of persuasive speech. The scenario of one figure speaking persuasively to a group structures not just drama (actor to chorus) and the assembly (politician or *rhêtôr* to citizens) but also the Athenian courts (plaintiff or defendant to jurymen). An ordinary Athenian male could theoretically participate in all three groups in the space of the same month. Any citizen could speak his mind at the *ekklêsia* or act as prosecutor. Like dramas, trials were 'contests' (*agônes*): they, too, dealt with evidence and detection, innocence or guilt, passions and characters. Court speeches were often scripted by professional rhetoricians to be 'performed' by the litigant – another theatrical element. From the *Wasps* of Aristophanes and other sources, it is clear that Athenians came to expect entertainment in court.¹⁴ By the same token, even our earliest plays contain extended arguments coloured by the language of court and assembly. The *agôn* of words is a regular feature of Old Comedy and frequent in tragedy. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* centres on investigation and prosecution, while the *Eumenides* is pure courtroom drama. Good examples of the structural device of paired opposing speeches occur in *Medea* (465–575), *Philoctetes* (1004–62), and in comedy, *Clouds* (961–1104) and – most prominently – *Frogs* (907–1073). Audience appetite for competitive speech was further heightened by the intellectual climate of fifth-century Athens, which encouraged rhetorical display. Philosophers for hire – Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and other sophists – taught success through public speaking, offering as sample wares their own often highly wrought epideictic speeches. The effects were bemoaned by at least one politician, Cleon, who accused his fellow citizens of treating vital deliberations like contests, and becoming 'spectators of speeches' (Thuc. 3.38). Given their similarities, Plato could label tragedy

a flattering form of ‘rhetorical public speaking’ (*Gorgias* 502b–d). In this energetic cross-fertilizing of genres, Euripidean drama, in particular, shows the signs of acquaintance with sophistic style and strategies. At the same time Athenian oratory, especially that of Lycurgus and Antiphon, used tragic language and quotations to add drama to courtroom narrations.

The Athenian state and its citizens dramatized their status, finally, through the medium of civic spectacles that interwove the institutions discussed so far. In the fourth century BC, and perhaps earlier, young men of the age for military service assembled yearly in the theatre, where they drilled before the people and received a shield and spear at state expense (*Aristotle, Ath. Pol.* 42.4). At least once a year, the Assembly met in the Theatre of Dionysus. This was the focal point, of course, for the City Dionysia. But the procession preceding the yearly drama contests marked the bounds of Athenian territory, accompanying the rough wooden cult image of the god from Eleutherae, on the Boeotian border, to be installed at the altar of his sanctuary near the Academy, whence, on the eve of the feast, it processed to the god’s shrine near the theatre, site of a bull sacrifice. Amid the bearers of offering trays, wineskins, ritual water and the sacrificial pig (whose blood would cleanse the theatre periphery), the drama producers walked in their ornate costumes. Models of phalluses (some large enough to require carts) were paraded, a relic of fertility functions of the local Dionysus cult. In a typically Athenian melding, this too was political: in the fifth century BC, each colony of the expanding empire sent a phallus for the procession. The announcement of honours to citizens and foreigners, the recognition of children of fallen warriors, the parading of subject states’ monetary contributions – all made the festival into civic theatre, a spectacle of optimism and celebration counterbalanced by the darker tragedies on view.

Rome

All the categories above might be applied to the culture of Rome as it developed over several centuries, but with changes of scale, emphasis and linkage. Drama was tied intimately to sanctioned games (*ludi*) of various types, but (unlike at Athens) not exclusively to festivals in celebration of one particular god. *Ludi scaenici*, in which plays figured, honoured Apollo, Flora, the Great Mother and Jupiter Optimus Maximus, among others. While many were instituted during the period of the Punic Wars, according to Roman tradition the very first *ludi scaenici* originated in the form of pantomime dances to flute accompaniment, performed by Etruscan actors, in a ritual seeking divine help during a pestilence in 364 BC (*Livy* 7.2). Thus, the functional, almost magical nature of drama is foregrounded, its role as a

‘performative utterance’ (to use the terms of speech-act theory) as well as a performance.

Such a practical function seems an odd match for the high artistic heritage of surviving early Roman dramas. The polished New Comedy of Menander, Diphilus and other Greek playwrights is, after all, the explicit forerunner of the plays of Plautus and Terence, and Athenian tragedy was the model for works by Ennius, Accius and Pacuvius. But we should not let the modern polarization of aesthetics and ritual obscure the picture. Furthermore, Roman drama, like its Greek counterparts, seems to have evolved rapidly in constant dialogue with other para-dramatic or non-fictional forms of impromptu entertainment (cf. Greek *iambos* and *dithyramb*, above). In Livy’s account of origins, the foreign *ludiones* with their graceful wordless dances were soon imitated by Roman youths, who introduced exchanges of jocular verses, with gestures to match. A mixed genre, called *saturae* (apparently, musical skits), next evolved. After further experimentation, Livius Andronicus, a Greek captured from Tarentum, in 240 BC at the *Ludi Romani* staged plays that featured plots. Livy’s sketch fails to mention the Greek literary learning of this innovator (who was also the translator of the *Odyssey* into Latin), but makes clear that native traditions like informal verse contests and the farces associated with the town of Atella continued to develop, even after theatrical art had become professionalized. This contrasts with Athens, where the pre-eminence of stage drama seems to have eclipsed other entertainments.

A Roman of the first century AD could see plays at least forty-three days a year, much more often than a citizen of classical Athens. But until the general Pompey built his theatre complex adjoining a temple of Venus in 55 BC, no permanent structure existed for productions.¹⁵ The fear that a successful producer of plays in the republican period could establish a dangerous political power, even more than Roman ambivalence about the moral effects of theatre, had confined earlier audiences to temporary wooden seating. In contrast to Athens, where wealthy citizens undertook to finance drama for their own prestige, Rome encouraged young politicians to lavishly supplement at their own expense the state funding of *ludi* as a way of gaining the edge in local elections. Themistocles, Pericles or Sophocles – all of whom served as play producers (*chorêgoi*) – may also have won popularity, but vote-buying had no place in the Athenian system. They stood to obtain more prominence through the political messages of the plays they funded, and the visibility of the expensive choregic monuments they erected upon winning. Although the plays of Plautus and Terence, Naevius and Ennius dealt with war, slavery, education and money, their half-Greek heritage (and frequent revivals) must have muted their value as immediate political propaganda. Making up

for this as a way of getting personal attention were the total entertainment packages devised by ambitious sponsors. *Ludi circenses* (races on foot and in chariots, boxing, wrestling) accompanied drama, not always harmoniously, at such festivals as the *Ludi Romani* or *Megalenses*. At the latter, in April 165 BC, the first performance of Terence's *The Mother-in-Law* was halted when an unruly crowd burst in, expecting to see a tightrope walker and a boxing match. A second attempt (at funeral games for L. Aemilius Paullus, 160 BC) got as far as the first act before the rumour of gladiatorial games at the spot attracted a mob interested in rougher performances.

As the Republic neared its end, games, drama and political spectacle increasingly merged. At the inauguration of Pompey's huge new theatre complex, a production of the *Clytemestra* of Accius boasted a procession with six hundred mules carrying the booty of Troy – an evocative touch, since Pompey several years before had stage-managed a two-day triumph featuring himself in a gem-studded chariot, a parade of plunder, painted depictions of his famous battles and hundreds of chained captives. Athenian spectacles such as the Panathenaic procession or the parades at the Dionysia required broad participation by citizens, whereas Rome's celebration of successful generals sharply separated the triumphal 'performer' from adoring audience. A similar dynamic – massed crowds and single performers – marked the most famous non-theatrical events with which Roman drama had to compete: gladiatorial games. In the eastern Empire, these were often held in reconstituted theatres, while in Rome itself and the west, purpose-built amphitheatres housed the wildly popular contests of man against man or animals. (Hunts and mock naval battles were also hosted.) The Colosseum (dedicated AD 80, with a hundred days of games) held fifty thousand spectators. They enjoyed blood-sport with the trappings of stage shows, as when gladiatorial production of a mime (a popular Roman genre) featured a real criminal, actually killed when the fiction called for it. An 'Orpheus' character might be surrounded by real beasts and done in by the bear. Attendants at the shows dressed as Pluto, Mercury and other gods. And the gladiators themselves often took on 'dramatic' roles: the fish-helmeted *murmillio* tried to dodge the net-carrying *retiarius*, slaves or prisoners of war played exotic tribal warriors in combat against courageous Romans. As larger-than-life characters – some of whom had superstar status – gladiators in turn became figures in Atellan farces.

The first recorded gladiatorial show (264 BC) was part of a funeral commemoration, like athletic events in the archaic Greek world. As a performance, Roman aristocratic burial rites offered a potent mixture of entertainment, public spectacle and mimetic theatre. The historian Polybius (6.53) describes funeral processions featuring actors wearing lifelike masks

(*imagines*) that represented the deceased's illustrious ancestors (six hundred of them at the funeral of M. Claudius Marcellus, 208 BC). The formal laudations, in the presence of the corpse and the elaborately dressed mummers, at the speaker's platform in the Forum, thus resembled monologues delivered to an audience of the famous dead. In this and other respects, the social dramas to be found in Rome's public spaces could command far more attention than the work of her playwrights.

Forum, courts and Senate provided arenas for oratory, the personal performances that could sway the state. Even more than in Athens, the study of persuasive speaking dominated education, occupied the leisured class, and seeped into the composition and reception of poetry (by way of staged public reading, the *recitatio*). Performances with a fictional colouring involved hypothetical, often bizarre, legal cases (*controversiae*) or imagined admonitions (*suasoriae*). The first century BC, in particular, saw tense interminglings of criminal prosecutions and political speech-making. The career of Cicero (106–43 BC) affords some glimpses of the cross-connection of genres, performers and audiences in his time. The orator was not unusual in his acquaintance with actors; a good friend was Quintus Roscius Gallus, known for excelling in the role of the pimp Ballio in Plautus' *Pseudolus*. A tragic actor, Clodius Aesopus, is said to have instructed the young man in elocution. In a defence speech (*Rosc. Am.*), Cicero makes easy allusions to a comedy of Caecilius Statius to support his assertions about rural Italian life (even though the play was set in Greece), presuming that his audience knew such dramas of the previous century.

The tie between oratory and drama was longstanding. Cicero records (*Brutus* 167) that the playwright Afranius (second century BC) imitated the style of Gaius Titius, an urbane orator and tragedian. It was at a revival of an historical drama by Afranius, reports Cicero, that the troupe of actors looked directly at his political nemesis in the audience, Publius Clodius, and spoke with dramatic intensity words about a profligate: 'The continued course and end of your wicked life'. To Cicero's delight, 'He sat frightened out of his wits; and he, who formerly used to pack the assemblies which he summoned with bands of noisy buffoons, was now driven away by the voices of these same players' (*Sest.* 118).¹⁶ Public figures in Rome were acutely sensitive to applause in the theatre, games or assemblies; for some, as Cicero says, 'it is inevitable that applause must appear immortality and hissing death' (*Sest.* 115). And crowds were just as sensitive to the political possibilities of dramatic performance: 'amid the great variety of sentences and apophthegms which occur in that play,' said Cicero of Afranius' drama, 'there was not one passage in which any expression of the poet had any bearing on our times, which either escaped the notice of the main body of the people, or

on which particular emphasis was not laid by the actor' (*Sest.* 118). His own exile (Cicero claims) had been alluded to this way on stage by a tearful actor, to the groans and applause of the audience. After his assassination by the henchmen of Antony in 43 BC, the orator's head and right hand, with which he wrote and gestured, were cut off and displayed in the Forum – a final theatrical counterthrust. Such histrionics, set against a long history of drama (theatrical and social), worked effectively throughout the long reign of performance culture in Greece and Rome.

NOTES

1. This and following translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. R. Bauman (ed.), 'Performance', in R. Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 41–9.
3. S. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 128.
4. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1956; rpt. Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1959).
5. J. Mukarovsky, *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukarovsky*, trans. and ed. J. Burbank and P. Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
6. D. L. Page, *PMG 876 in Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 464.
7. Suetonius, *On Games*, 2.2.
8. E.g. the image of the dice-toss at Sophocles fr. 895, in Stefan Radt (ed.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta 4* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), p. 574.
9. See further Denard, ch. 8 and Rehm, ch. 10 in this volume.
10. Alcman fr. 1 *PMG* (see note 6).
11. J. Winkler, 'The Ephebes' Song: *Tragôidia* and *Polis*', in J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 20–62.
12. On the possible ritual origins of drama, see Graf, ch. 3 in this volume.
13. See Walton, ch. 16 in this volume. Estimates of the number of citizens range from 60,000 for the mid-fifth century BC to 30,000 for the fourth century.
14. See E. Hall, 'Lawcourt Dramas: The Power of Performance in Greek Forensic Oratory', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 40 (1995), pp. 39–58.
15. See Beacham, ch. 12 in this volume.
16. This and following translations from the oration are by C. D. Yonge, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891).

FURTHER READING

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