

Focusing on the “Margins” of Sophocles’ *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*

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Adjusting Our Lenses:

When we read the classic plays of 5th Century B.C. Athens, we have to shift our contemporary notions of what a play is and how theatre functioned in Attica. We notice that the structure of these plays is different. There are choral **odes** in which a group of characters sing and dance in unison (kind of like today’s musical theatre numbers) and **episodes** in which the central characters speak or sing to one another, to the chorus, to the gods, and to the audience. The odes are broken into **strophes**, “turning,” and **antistrophes**, “turning back,” that rhythmically mirror one another. The parallel structure allowed for viewers to understand the **agon**, the “struggle” or “contest,” between opposing views through three physical senses: sight (as the chorus danced one direction and then literally turned the opposite direction); sound (the equally balanced measures of music that supported each view); and touch (the rhythm the dancers’ feet made as they stepped in rhythm with the odes’ poetry. [Incidentally, the way we describe lines of poetry as being comprised of “feet” comes from the Greek tradition of literally stomping out the odes’ rhythm upon the ground with one’s feet.]

Aristotle’s *Poetics* (335 B.C.), the first work of theatrical criticism, sought to describe the substance and nature of theatre. His thesis that classical tragedy was intended to influence **catharsis**, a purging of emotions such as pity and fear, forever shaped how people view western drama. That privileging of emotion often leads us to focus on the central character, for it is through that character that we can best vicariously experience the emotions of suffering. This concern that viewers personally identify with a protagonist creates the groundwork for much of what we see on the stage, in film, and on television today; however, it is not quite representative of what occurred in Athens’ Theatre of Dionysus in the 5th Century B.C.

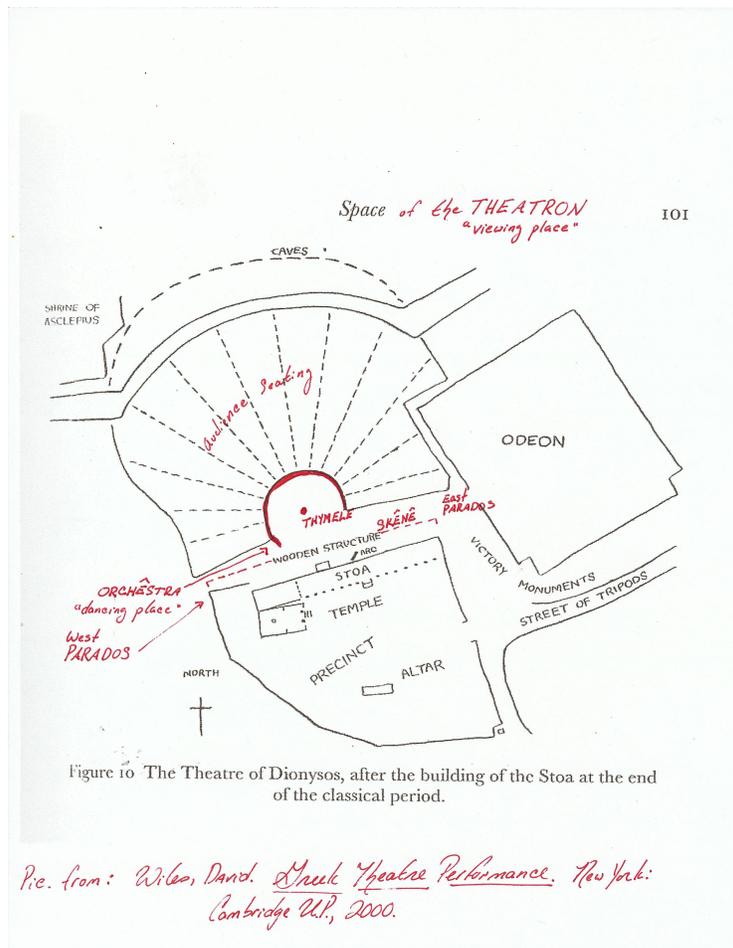
We must remember that Aristotle created his theory seventy-four years after Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* won the Festival of Dionysus in 409 B.C. and a century or more after Sophocles’ *Ajax* was performed in Athens. For Aristotle, the plays were texts, words removed from their original dances and melodies, historic objects removed from their context as elements in within a larger communal ritual. The critic privileged the central characters above the chorus, the playwright above the collective players, and the play above the audience. Such views allowed Aristotle to relegate music and spectacle to the lowest positions in his hierarchical ordering of dramatic elements: plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle. Consequently, when we read classic Greek plays today, we often gloss over the choral odes and don’t think about the meaning of spectacle, mainly created by the mass movements of 12 to 15 dancers before a crowd of 15,000-30,000 viewers who looked down upon the central playing space and the Athenian landscape beyond.

A focus on the emotional journey of a central character in classic Greek theatre presents challenges when one reads *Theatre of War*, the pairing of one of Sophocles’ earliest plays with

one of his last. When I first read *Theatre of War*, my immediate concern centered upon how I might teach these two very differently structured plays, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, as a single theatrical text and experience. I wanted to find a way into the texts that could free us from a focus on the divergent plot structures or the one shared central character, Odysseus—who changes greatly between the two plays. As I reread the plays, I soon discovered that the dialogue I found most interesting came not from the plays’ major characters, but from those we normally think of as marginalized: the choruses and Tecmessa. Their dialogue reflects the perspectives of everyday Athenian citizens and slaves during times of war, perspectives that allow us critical insights into how classical Greek theatre staged worldviews that shaped Attica. So, for this project, I attempt to create three critical lenses that might help our students adjust their focus to what Aristotle—and by extension we—often see as peripheral elements of Greek plays: the chorus, the setting, and the place of women in democratic Athens. I’ll call the three lenses: “Great Men Need Small Men,” “The *Omphalos* and Settings,” and “Voicing the Feminine.”

First, Some Basics:

In *Greek Theatre Performance*, David Wiles provides a sketch of the Theatre of Dionysus. As you can see, I’ve doctored it a little to allow a common point of reference.



Theatron, the “viewing place:” Audience members sat on the sloped hillside of the Acropolis. Further north behind them sat the Parthenon, the temple of Athena—“female patron” and protector “of a society ruled by men” (Wiles *Greek* 74).

Orchestra, the “dancing place:” The hillside surrounded a round space where the chorus and actors performed. Tragedy, as Aristotle reminds us, grew out of the *dithyramb*, ritualistic songs and dances performed in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. If you look at Wiles’ sketch, you’ll see a mark labeled “arc.” The arc refers to seven stones that archeologists believe created the original 24 meter, round dancing place of the earliest theatrical performances. As the Festival of Dionysus continued, the Theatre of Dionysus underwent a series of architectural shifts. Exactly, when each remodeling occurred is often hotly debated by theatre historians.

Thymele: the center of the orchestra contained an altar. Rather than being a high structure that might inhibit the audience’s visibility, many theatre historians believe that the thymele was a low alter where *libations*, offerings of wine, oil, and sometimes blood, were poured into the ground to honor both Dionysus and the chthonic deities, associated with death and fertility, who lived under the earth. Sometimes the thymele could theatrically represent a hero’s grave. When we think about strophes and antistrophes, meaning “turning” and “turning back,” we can imagine how the dancers may have circled the thymele in one direction and then the other.

Parodoi: were side entrances and exits used by chorus members and actors. Note that there was one on the east and one on the west. The east parodos connects to the Street of Tripods, which was where a grand parade celebrating Athens’ military leaders, athletes, tribes, foreigners, women, and artists entered the theatre at the beginning of the Festival of Dionysus.

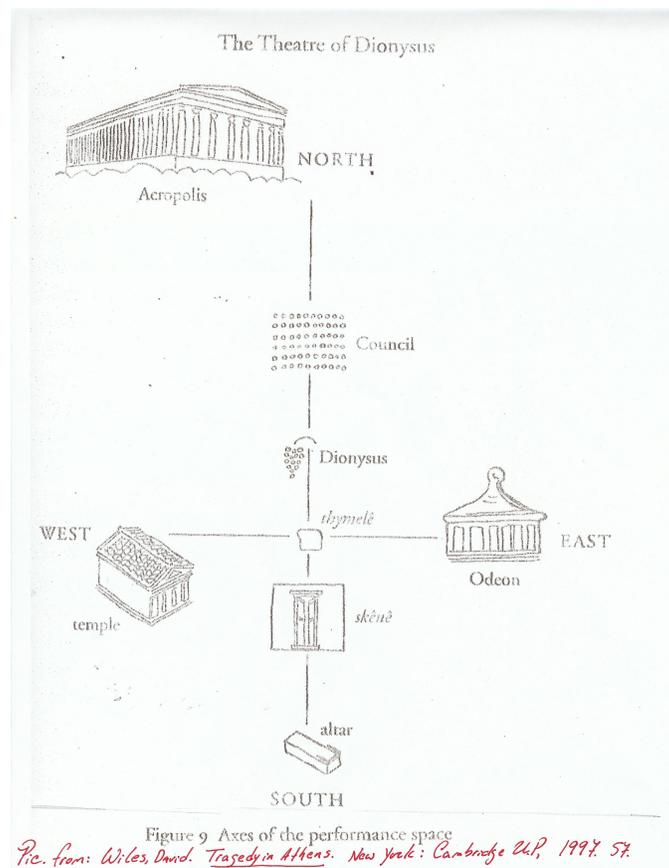
The **Skênê:** was originally a wooden structure, as Wiles marks on his map. It had two levels: the ground level had central door for entrances and exits, and the rooftop allowed gods to appear on high. In later remodeling, the wooden structure was replaced by a permanent, raised colonnade of stone called the *stoa*. There is much debate about when the stoa was erected to divide the theatre from the space beyond and to help control crowd access into the theatre; however, there is ample evidence that as long as the Festival of Dionysus retained its ritual nature, the wooden skênê was used. Thus, we can imagine *Ajax* and most likely *Philoctetes* enacted with a skênê. The reason that a skênê is important to our discussion is because the low, wooden structure opened the audience’s field of vision to the vista beyond the theatre. From their seats, they could not only watch the play, but they could also see the immediate religious monuments beyond the skênê, the town of Athens spread out beneath them, and the Aegean sea beyond.

The **Odeon** was a structure built in 435 B.C. by Pericles after the Persian War. It housed musical competitions and may have been used as a dressing room or warm up room for choruses during the Festival of Dionysus.

The **Temple** that directly connects to the stoa and which was quite visible during the use of the skênê is one of the oldest archeological elements of the Theatre of Dionysus. Many believe that the Festival of Dionysus had originated here; as Wiles explains, the temple “housed the wooden statue of Dionysus that came from Eleutherae, and was the focus of the ceremonial” (Wiles *Tragedy* 54).

The *Altar* further south of the temple was the site of a bull's sacrifice which began the dramatic portion of the Festival of Dionysus. The bull was believed to be the prize for the Athenian tribe who performed the best dithyramb.

When we investigate classical Greek plays, it's important to remember that the plays were created to live within an environment that was highly charged with a sense of religious ritual and democratic ideology. Plays were not art that was removed from daily experience; rather, they were communal rituals that symbolically represented the struggles of and commitments to Athenian democracy. The theatre literally existed at the intersection of Athenian religious and political philosophies. We see this relationship clearly in Wiles' sketch of the "Axes of Performance Space."



City Dionysia

The City Dionysia was the annual spring festival that culminated in the presentation of Greek tragedies. During the festival, Athens closed down for five days and people came from all of

Attica's cities. Everyone—slaves, women, foreigners, and citizens—were recognized during the rituals leading up to the play competition. On the eve of the festival, young men brought the statue of Dionysus through the city gates into Athens. The official days of the festival were broken down as follows:

- Day 1: Communal procession to Altar where the ten tribes compete to for the best dithyramb performance
Sacrifice of bulls
- Day 2: 5 Comedies by different playwrights (eventually this is a competition)
- Day 3-5: Competition of Tragic plays. On each day, one troupe of actors, chorus dancers, and musicians perform a trilogy of tragedies followed by a satyr play. All four works of each day are the product of a state-sponsored playwright working with a company of performers produced by a wealthy, Athenian citizen, called a *chorêgos*.

It is interesting to note the description of the procession, which best typifies the way in which Athenians viewed the Festival of Dionysus as a collective ritual that embodied individuals coming together in order to form a democracy. Here, I'll quote at length from Wiles' *Tragedy in Athens*, because it is the most vivid of descriptions I've read of the procession's symbolic nature:

In Athens recent excavation has cleared much more of the Street of Tripods that leads into the theatre from the east. The approach to the theatre was lined with tripods commemorating the victories of choruses. . . . The procession which came down this sacred way was a huge event in which the *polis* put its identity and structure comprehensively on display. Responsibility for its organization fell upon representatives of the ten tribes. The 1,000 dancers who were to perform the dithyramb in the sequel to the procession were divided into their tribes. The council who sat as a collective probably walked as a collective, as did the ephebes [young men] on military service. Women were present, and their role as bearers of new life was symbolized by the maiden who walked in front with unripened spring fruit. Even the criminal fraternity was put on display. Subject states sent phallic emblems [the symbol of Dionysus] so that they could be represented as part of the city. The phallus symbolized the renewal of life, whilst a sacrificial ox symbolized the necessity of death. While citizens carried the wine that belonged to the wine-god, foreign residents identified by red robes carried the water and empty mixing-basins, symbolizing their inferior status in the social mix of Athens. The other sacrificial oxen needed to feed the participants were probably incorporated in to the procession. The *chorêgoi* in rich robes and crowns must have been accompanied by their choruses. . . . The statue of Dionysus. . . probably came out of the sanctuary to meet the procession. Tragedies, under the eyes of the god, were the culmination of a process of communal self-display and self-definition. The dithyramb, which combined the processional mode with the narrative mode, was the point of transition when procession gave way to tragedy and participants became spectators (26-27).

The concept that the community is participatory and that there are no harsh divides between spectator and performer is key to understanding how tragedies functioned in the City Dionysia. The tragedies themselves were rituals of communal performance within a larger five-day collective ceremony. Such a communal lens, then, shifts the way we understand the role of the chorus, the setting of plays, and non-heroic characters.

Great Men Need Small Men

In *Ajax* the chorus who represent sailors sings:

Great men make easy targets
Envy stalks them in the night
Small men stand defenseless
without leaders to protect them,
but great men need small men
to stand before them like a wall. (34. 7-13)

Their words speak a truth about the nature of war heroes and of Athenian democracy. Athens became a strong city-state because of the strength of its military. In particular, the Athenian Navy, which was made financially possible by wealthy citizens who sponsored ships, not only allowed the Athenians to protect their coastline but also demonstrates how Athens' political system demanded that the wealthy find honor in giving their riches to strengthen the community. Jon Hesk explains that by organizing a society in which the wealthy gave freely to support civic needs and festivals "constituted a celebration of collective will and its melding with the competitive, honour-seeking behaviour of individuals. Athenians called this behaviour *philotimia* ('ambitious striving' or 'love of honor') (73).

This spirit of individual service for the health of the collective extended to all Athenians, who believed political, physical, and ritualistic service were equally important elements for developing a strong democracy. While a wealthy citizen might sponsor a warship or a civic competition, ordinary citizens would serve on the Athenian counsel as delegates of their demes, spend time in military service, or dance in a theatrical chorus. Sophocles himself served Athens in various ways. Records of his early life state that "As a beautiful adolescent boy, Sophocles is supposed to have been chosen . . . to lead the chorus in the victory celebrations after the battle of Salamis" (Wiles, *Greek* 172). During his military career, he was twice elected general, a position that made him directly accountable to the men he lead. In his senior years, he was not only the most highly decorated playwright of his time, he also served as a senior statesmen and as a priest of Asclepius, the god of healing, whose shrine was north-west of the Theatre of Dionysus. *Philoctetes*, one of Sophocles' last two plays is based on Asclepian themes.

The Greek chorus is directly connected to this idea of individual service to democracy. Unlike the three main actors who played the "major" tragic characters, the chorus was comprised of twelve to fifteen individuals who were selected by their communities to participate in the upcoming festivals. Theatre historian, Peter Arnott, explains, "Plays were probably in rehearsal for the best part of a year. The chorus members were unpaid volunteers, who undertook this

service as part of their civic duty. They were trained and costumed at state expense through the . . . *choregos*” (23). Consequently, when Athenian citizens attended the Festival of Dionysus, many watched the theatrical competition not just as theatregoers, but as critical viewers who intimately knew the personal sacrifice made by chorus members.

The chorus, then, can be understood as an extension of the Athenian polis. This connection becomes stronger when one notes the architecture of the classic theatre: no boundaries separate the viewing space from the orchestra. Almost completely surrounded by the audience, the orchestra allowed audience members to see one another across the playing space; because the tragedies occurred in daylight, performers and audience members could always see one another. This intimate arrangement made the spectators take on a more active role in the theatre that operated in the same fashion as “in the conduct of public worship, or in the assembly” (Arnott 11). When we are cognizant of this model, we can read *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* with an added layer of understanding. The tragedies’ choruses of sailors are metaphorically and literally an extension of the Athenian public, many of whom had or were serving their country as warfighters and may have also served in earlier choruses. Such relationships allowed audience members to connect the tragic worlds of myth with contemporary issues in democratic Athens.

As we study these two plays set during the Trojan war, we do so knowing that their contemporary audience endured the Peloponnesian war, which officially raged from 431-404 B.C. (although conflict had begun earlier). Wiles observes that “The lack of good reason for fighting the Trojan war is a running theme in tragedy. Despite the fine intentions of individuals, the siege ended in atrocities, and the gods ensured that the victors would in turn become victims” (*Greek* 98). Such bloody history allowed the Trojan war to serve “as a metaphor for the Peloponnesian war” in which half of Athens’ adult, male population gave their lives (98). Within this context, we read the lamentation of *Ajax*’s chorus in a new way:

When will this
relentless battle
on the outskirts
of Troy, with its
countless terrors,
and un-abating
violence, finally
come to a close. . . .
[War] has robbed
me of flowers
and large bowls
of wine, and
the sound of
sweet music. (62.12-19, 34-39)

With the reference to music and wine, the chorus allows mythic time (the Trojan war) to become contemporary time, as Athens’ dwindling polis (both audience and performers alike) gather to perform a ritualistic festival for the god of wine at a time of devastating war.

The *Omphalos* and Settings

Homesickness is a common theme shared by the military choruses of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. When the sailors in *Philoctetes* try to imagine what life must have been like for Philoctetes on the Isle of Lemnos, they cry:

He did not plant seeds
on sacred soil, but shot
quick arrows with his bow,
hunting down wild game.
Nine years without wine
to drink, poor man, and only
stagnant pools of rain. (102.17-23)

Not only does this passage share a common reference to wine (again linking the world of the play to the ritual that the audience and performers share), but it also claims Athens as “sacred soil.” *Ajax*’s chorus shares this view when the sailors sing that they wish they could “belt out my/ regards to sacred Athens” (63. 27-28).

Such cries of homesickness illustrate Wiles’ claim that “Behind Greek drama lies the experience of spatial dislocation and insecurity,” an argument that takes on even greater weight when one considers these two plays’ military themes and metaphoric use of the Trojan war (*Greek 95*). Just as the chorus of Greek drama reminded Athenian citizens of their responsibilities to the democracy, so did the physical setting of the Festival of Dionysus. Audience members looked down on the orchestra, the city beyond, and the sea reaching into the east. As the trilogies were performed, the sun crept over Theatre of Dionysus from east to west, from the audience’s left to right. This arrangement of the theatre allowed audiences to make connections between the world of the play and their physical world. Accordingly, settings in classical Greek plays are important reminders of Athenian concepts regarding civility and democracy.

To be an Athenian citizen meant that one was a descendent from the *omphalos*, or earth’s navel. We see a metaphor for this navel on the stage: it is the thymele in the middle of the orchestra. Athenians believed that because they came from the earth’s center, that they possessed the qualities of balance that allowed for their superiority and civilized way of life. When one, such as a soldier, traveled away from the center of the world, he became de-centered literally and figuratively. One can imagine why Philoctetes, who has lived alone on Lemnos for nine years, endures such trauma. Following this logic, people who did not come from Athens were not graced with the same qualities of balance and democracy and were often viewed to be barbaric. This xenophobia allows us to read how Athenian dramatists often created and challenged ideas of “otherness.”

Because the theatre served as the world in microcosm, the use of the playing space allowed the actors and choruses to physically move in ways that communicated Athenian worldviews. I have already mentioned how strophes and antistrophes were associated with moving in different circular motions around the thymele; likewise, theatrical space was symbolically represented by the east and west parodi and the inside/outside binary represented by the skênê door. For

Athenians, the west represented civilization; the east, barbarian lands. (Just think of Medea who comes from what is present-day Georgia.) The parodoi, then, took on a similar system of values:

East	West
Left	Right
Foreign	Athenian
Barbaric	Civilized
Female	Male
Dark	Light
Chthonic	Olympic
Emotional	Rational
Death	Life

With this in mind, when one reads a play like *Philoctetes*, in which one direction leads into the wilderness of Lemnos and the other direction leads back to civilization, one can imagine how the performers might have physically used space to communicate meaning.

The inside/outside binary also functioned according to Athenian values similar to those represented by east and west. Democracy flourished in public spaces, in the open air, under the light of the sun. In classical Athens, public space was male space; women, who were not considered citizens, belonged indoors, near the hearth. Events that occurred in public were generally trusted, but things that happened indoors were suspicious, dark, hidden, and mysterious. It is significant that Ajax, surrounded by his mutilated animals' corpses, emerges from the skênê door, as such carnage could not have taken place under the rational, Olympian sun.

Of course, we need to be wary of reading all classical Greek plays strictly according to such binaries. Remember that the democracy is based on open debate and that, similarly, the playwrights were interested in staging agon, the conflicts in democratic society. Obviously, not everyone agreed with all aspects of Athenian democracy: some nobles did not like giving their wealth to the city; some men felt that women should not be relegated to the home; some citizens did not agree with seeing all foreigners as inferior. The theatre became an open forum of sorts to address both sides of such controversial issues.

Voicing the Feminine

The position of women in Athenian society is one point of contention that many classical Greek playwrights explored for dramatic purposes. Although Athens viewed itself as balanced, as demonstrated by an Olympian religious tradition that canonically honored six gods and six goddesses; as democracy took root in 5th Century B.C. Athens, the public shifted its views of gender. Wiles writes, "the emergence of democracy meant that female voices like Sappho's were removed from the public domain" (*Greek* 67). At the same time, the sixth female goddess, "Hestia goddess of the domestic hearth," was replaced by Dionysus, a god associated with gender ambiguity. Dionysus was a god who inspired individuals to transform into the collective and Athenian order to give way to chaos (75).

Replacing Hestia with Dionysus ritualistically mirrored the new laws classical Athens imposed upon women. These included:

regulation of women's festivals; restraints upon extravagant dress; a curfew for women after dark; smaller trousseaux to prevent bridegrooms from appearing to sell their bodies for money; no display at funerals with hired mourners and self-flagellation. The funeral procession was to take place before daybreak, with women walking at the back, and traditional female mourning was dismissed as "barbaric." (69)

Often in Greek drama, we see women associated with mourning, fierce emotion, death, and personal revenge based upon a wife's protection of her family. In Athenian democracy, however, the family (or tribe) had to sacrifice itself for the sake of the community. Women, who had once lead funeral rituals, were replaced by men who conducted "rational" practices in which attendees kept their emotions in check. In a final act of women's suppression, the male children of "fallen warriors would now be reared by the state and not by their mothers" (67).

This loss of personal power and erasure of familial bonds was a dramatic source of conflict that playwrights could exploit in order to question the agon between the individual and collective. Female characters, such as Tecmessa (who is a foreigner and so observes fewer restrictions regarding to whom she speaks), represent not only the shifts in women's rites but also what all Athenian citizens gave up when they sacrificed individual will, emotional expressions, and familial identity to the city-state. Wiles writes, "Tears and lamentations that were no longer tolerated in real funerals seem to have been relocated in the theatre. Men who restrained themselves over the real bodies of their fallen comrades were content to weep in the theatre as they watched men dressed as women wailing and lamenting over simulated corpses" (*Greek* 67). Such insights, then, allow us to image the social role Tecmessa plays in *Ajax*, as she fears Ajax's suicide, fights for his proper burial, and worries what will become of their son.

Although there are no women in *Philoctetes*, the female role of mourning is taken by the male chorus of sailors, who often invoke female deities and actions. When Neoptolemus tells the story of how he was denied his inheritance, the chorus sings:

Mountain goddess,
Rhea,
Mother Earth,
Cybele,
Womb of god,
I called out to you
when thy stripped him
of his father's arms. (91.14-21)

Later, when the chorus pities Philoctetes' exile, they lament that he had no one to nurture or comfort him:

There is no one to sing

him a lullaby, or heal
his wounds with herbs,
if he should start shaking.
But like a baby without
a nursing mother, he crawls
on all fours, the infection
spreading up his spine. (102.9-16)

In both cases, the chorus seems to point to the imbalance in Athenian society as a source for wars without end and suffering without expression or comfort.

Physical and communal healing is a central theme of *Philoctetes*, which Sophocles wrote when he was about 90 years old and serving as a priest for the cult of Asclepius. It is interesting to note that Asclepius, god of healing, shared the ambiguous gender qualities of Dionysus. As you can note by viewing the diagram of the Theatre of Dionysus, the shrines of both deities were physically associated with one another. Wiles writes that they “were not only spatially but also temporally contiguous, for the feast and procession of Asclepius coincided with the *proagon*, the preliminary festive day of the Dionysia” (*Tragedy* 43). If we, then, view the geography of the Athenian theatre in relationship with the historic setting of Athens’ falling to Sparta in 405 B.C. and the celebration of two gods that represent both male *and female* qualities, we can gain perspective about how *Philoctetes* both affirmed Athenian democracy and also challenged the polis to discover methods to accommodate the changing needs of society.

Classroom Investigations

- We often think of American democracy as something flexible and changing, based upon the needs of society. In what ways did Dionysus, a god associated with death and rebirth, represent democracy to Athenians?
- What are the topics of agon in *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*?
- What social concerns are voiced by choruses of the two plays?
- Imagining the symbolic use of space, how might you stage an episode or choral ode from one of the two plays?
- Can you locate moments of transcendence, in which the world of the play addresses contemporary issues in the world of the audience? How do these moments function? What is at stake?
- How do we see the binaries of gender reaffirmed and also challenged in the plays?
- What is the social function of theatre today? How is the production of Bryan Doerries’ *Theatre of War* similar to the organization of classical Greek theatre? How is it different?
- What role does the audience play in defining the theatrical experience?

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