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Rush Rehm: The Play of Space

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INTRODUCTION

To underestimate, ignore and diminish space amounts to the overestimation of texts, written matter, and writing systems, along with the readable . . . to the point of assigning these a monopoly on intelligibility.

—Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

I BASE THIS BOOK on the simple premise that space is a proper value of the theater, part and parcel of what it is and how it works. Until recently, the function of space has gone relatively unnoticed in scholarship and criticism of our earliest drama. Now that the subject has emerged, it usually takes the form of a set of spatial binaries, reflecting the influence of structuralism. We confront a spatially discrete world, in which distinctions such as public-private, outside-inside, cultured-wild, center-margin are applied to the spaces of tragedy. Armed with this oppositional structure, critics argue (some with great subtlety) that tragedy supports traditional gender differentiations and patriarchy;¹ that it exploits the basic polarities that myth seeks to mediate;² that it plays into an “us” (Greek, Athenian, male) versus “them” (barbarian, metic/slave, female) scenario, which uses space to mark the “otherness” of the “Other”;³ that it instantiates a split between performance as social event and writing as private act;⁴ or—just the opposite—that tragedy’s dependence on writing provides a “spectographic division of narrative into exotopic speech positions.”⁵ Although such approaches can generate illuminating readings of the plays and the culture that produced them, the explicit dualism underlying the various interpretive schemes often leaves the complexity of space in Greek tragedy overlooked, or unexplored.

A spatial alternative to structuralist readings that has emerged over the past twenty years involves what some call spatial semiotics. This relatively new critical field already suffers from a proliferation of competing “sets of spaces,” each designed to function conceptually with little concern for the physical or affective nature of the phenomenon.⁶ In his analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, Lowell Edmunds modifies Issacharoff’s semiotic approach to theatrical space by offering the following categories: theater space (the architectural givens); stage space (stage and set design, costumes, actors’ bodies, makeup, etc.); and dramatic space (created by the “stage-word”), subdivided into mimetic space (dramatic discourse on the visible space of the stage) and diegetic space (words focused on offstage space), further subdivided into “space represented as visible to the characters on stage (but not

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visible to the spectators) and space invisible to both the characters on stage and the spectators.”⁷ A moment’s reflection reveals that these categories aim at taxonomic completeness rather than at an understanding of dramatic action and spatial interaction. Everything that happens in a play will “fit,” but we may understand no better in the end what they are “fit for.” On the other hand, the semiotics of space also can suffer from the most sweeping of generalities, such as the claim that “space is an active agent” in making theatrical meanings.⁸ The redundancy “active agent” suggests a rhetorical desperation aimed at obscuring the fact that space can “act” only in the loosest metaphorical sense. Action implies choice, or at least the possibility of choice, as Kenneth Burke reminds us: “Things move, persons act.”⁹ To accept that space influences the meanings we make in the theater hardly requires that we grant to it the property of human agency.

So what do we mean by space? Keimpe Algra answers the skeptic who thinks that our understanding of the term has nothing in common with ancient Greek usage, steering a sane course between the Scylla of radical relativism (emphasizing discontinuities, while ignoring the problem of coherence) and the Charybdis of simple essentialism (assuming a simple identity of meaning across time).¹⁰ I discuss various meanings of space in the appendix (“Theories of Space”), but let me sketch three interrelated ways I apply the term to the theater:

1. Space “allows for” what we see and hear during a theatrical performance, providing a (primarily) visual and acoustic context for relating objects, bodies, characters, and their manifestation in dramatic action.
2. Space also “comes to be” in the extension of objects and bodies in the theater, something like their “aura” viewed in material and not imaginary terms.
3. Space is an umbrella term that covers places, locations, regions, geographical features, and so on, whether present, represented, or referred to during a performance. That which is not literally present can “come to presence” in the space of the theater, when (for example) a dramatic character powerfully evokes the place from which he or she arrives.

In his critique of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (where Time is the basic category of human existence), the Japanese philosopher Watsuji (1889–1960) emphasizes the importance of linking space and the social:

My concern was this: while temporality is presented as the subject’s structure of being, why isn’t spatiality equally well presented as a fundamental structure of being? . . . Temporality cannot be a true temporality unless it is in conjunction with spatiality. The reason that Heidegger stopped there is that his Dasein is limited to . . . existence as the Being of the individual person. This is only an abstracted aspect when we consider persons under the double structure of being both individual and social.¹¹

In daily experience Watsuji locates a more fundamental, intersubjective reality, called “basho,” reminiscent of the gestalt thinkers who insist on background and situation as integral to personal life-space. Leaving the internal clock and the individual’s solipsistic focus on the self in time, we find ourselves “out there” in the world. The fact of live performance involves a comparable spatial move, away from private time into public space. Speaking generally, we might claim that the theater is *the* art of social space, bringing before an audience the potentially intersubjective “life-spaces” of the characters in the drama.¹²

It is a truism that early Greek thinkers (and many others after them) frame mental acts—particularly “knowing”—in terms of vision, acknowledging our human dependence on the external world when giving an account of our inner processes of thought. As Iris Murdoch observes, “Our ability to use visual structures to understand non-visual structures (as well as different visual ones) is fundamental to explanation in any field.”¹³ Hers is a useful reminder for the theater, recalling the etymological link that both theory and theater have with the Greek word for sight—*theaomai* ‘I see’, from whence *theatron* ‘theater,’ ‘where the viewers are’; *theatēs* ‘the spectator,’ ‘sightseer’; *theōros* ‘spectator,’ ‘ambassador’ (who announces a truce linked to a sacred festival, or serves on an official delegation to an oracle or a Panhellenic contest); *theōreō* ‘I see,’ ‘I view as a spectator,’ ‘I serve as a *theōros* [envoy],’ ‘I contemplate’; and finally *theōria* ‘way of seeing,’ ‘contemplation’.¹⁴ Werner Jaeger summarizes the relationship this way:

The *theōria* of Greek philosophy was deeply and inherently connected with Greek art and Greek poetry; for it embodied not only rational thought, the element which we think of first, but also (as the name implies) vision, which apprehends every object as a whole, which sees the *idea* in everything—namely, the visible pattern.¹⁵

Seeing and knowing are closely connected in Greek; the same root is used as a past tense to mean (mainly) “see” (*eidon* ‘I saw’) and as a perfect tense to mean “know” (*oīda*, ‘I have seen,’ ‘I know’), as if knowledge were a perfected form of seeing. Indeed, early Greek thinkers conceived of intellectual activity on the model of physical sight.¹⁶ According to both Empedocles and Plato, interaction is only possible between entities of a similar kind, exemplified by the “well-known thesis that the human eye could not perceive the light of the sun were the eye itself not a luminous object.”¹⁷ The sun illuminates all things, therefore it sees everything; the human eye sees, therefore it too illuminates. To lose the “seeing light” of the sun meant to live no more, and Hades, by popular etymology, was the place for the “invisible” or “unseen” (*a-idēs*).¹⁸ By extension, that which is not seen is blind. Amphitryon in *Hercules* praises the archer who wounds his opponents “with blind arrows” (*tuphlois toxemasin*), meaning they arrive unseen (Eur. *HF* 199).¹⁹ The par-

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odos of *Antigone* opens with the Chorus's apostrophe to the sun—"Oh eye of the golden day" (*S. Ant.* 104–5)—which shone on, and saw, the Theban defeat of the Argive invaders, and now looks down on its aftermath, much like the spectators in the theater.²⁰

"Light was vision, and vision was luminous," Vernant observes, discussing the reciprocity between seen and seer in Greek thought:

For the ancient Greek man, the world was not the objectified external universe, cut off from man by the impassable barrier that separates matter from the mind, the physical from the psychic. Man was in a relationship of intimate community with the animate universe to which everything connected him.²¹

For the Greeks, the corporeal and the intellectual, the physical and the mental, did not present distinct realms.²²

Extending this observation, Vernant denies subjective interiority—an apparently essential spatial metaphor for conscious activity—to the ancient Greeks. He separates their mental life from the later European metaphysical and psychological tradition that focuses on subjective experience and inner contemplation.²³ From Descartes' doubting to Heidegger's concentration on temporality, modern philosophers have privileged self-examination over engagement with the world "out there." According to Vernant, this later tradition has misappropriated the Greek rubric "Know thyself," with the unintended results that the original religious, social, and environmental significance ("Know your human place in the cosmos") has been displaced by the modern ego, driven to explore its inner psyche, or (in the new-age imperative) to "follow your bliss."²⁴

Vernant and others are right to emphasize the communal and social aspects basic to Greek self-conception, "public space" against "private self." But further reflection on the relationship between vision, knowledge, and self-perception complicates the picture. In ancient Athens, for example, the term "eye" (*omma*, *ophthalmos*) could serve as a metonym for the essential quality of a thing or person; "the eye of the bride" (*S. Tr.* 527), for example, indicates both "the bride herself" and "the bride as perceived by the groom" (i.e., attractive, alluring).²⁵ In a "mixed" metonymy, the Chorus of *Choephoroi* hopes that the "eye of the house" will not perish (*A. Cho.* 934), and Athena at the end of the trilogy calls forth "the eye [*omma*] of the whole land of Theseus" to escort the Furies home (*Eum.* 1025–26). Occurring twelve times in the *Iliad*, the standard Homeric euphemism "darkness hid his eyes" equates death with the loss of ocular brightness. The term *prosōpon* (literally, "toward the eye") was used for face, mask, and dramatic character.²⁶

Speaking generally, the link between self and sight seems to emerge at a young age, evidenced in the game where children cover their eyes and assert "you can't see me." Psychologists traditionally assumed an irrational egocentricity in youngsters—because I (the child) can't see you, you can't see me.

In recent experiments, however, developmental psychologists discovered something quite different. When they asked their eyes-covered subjects “Can I see you?” most two- or three-year-olds answered “No.” But they did answer “Yes” to a host of other questions: “Can I see Snoopy” (a nearby doll)? “Yes.” “Can I see your leg?” “Yes.” “Your head?” “Yes.” “Can I see you?” “No.” Children don’t manifest an egocentric misunderstanding of other’s vision; rather they locate the self at or near the point of visual observation.²⁷

Returning to the world of ancient Greece, we can extend the triad of knowledge-sight-self by considering the link between intelligence and blindness that occurs in Greek myth. In the cases of Demodocus, the blind bard in the *Odyssey*, and the prophet Teiresias (in both his epic and tragic manifestations), blindness does not indicate *self*-knowledge. Instead, the blind seer possesses insight into the mythic past, the communal present, or the foreseeable future. For the protagonist of Sophocles’ two Oedipus’ plays, however, the loss of external vision leads to a growth in inner personal sight, revealing a space of incipient self-awareness. As Oedipus says on his arrival to Athens, “Do not dishonor me, seeing my hard-to-look-at eyes / for I have come as a holy, god-fearing man / bringing great benefits to your city” (*OC* 285–88). An unspecified character in a fragment of a lost Sophocles’ play puts it simply, “I close my eyes and see.”²⁸

As Bernard Williams points out, sight and seeing provide a key to Greek ethical thinking, particularly with regard to shame.²⁹ But shame implies more than being seen by others; if that were all it meant, then the central issue would simply involve avoiding discovery. The Homeric hero could run away freely, so long as no one saw him; Ajax in Sophocles’ play would set sail after his mad butchery of livestock, before anyone could find out who did it (recall that Ajax is unaware that Athena has allowed Odysseus to view his madness). But Ajax cannot so easily escape the consequences of his actions; the simple function of retrospective narration—in which he engages during the play and imagines performing in the future with his father—forces Ajax to view himself as an object, to see himself in a setting as if he were someone else.³⁰ In a similar way, “prospective shame” can operate motivationally (much like fear), when a character anticipates what someone *might* say or how he himself *might* feel if he were to commit a shameful act, with “the imagined gaze of an imagined other” in mind. Nausicaa, for example, fears what her people might say if they were to see her with the handsome stranger, adding “And I myself would think badly of a girl who acted so” (*Od.* 6.285–86). Along with the prospect of hostile reactions, Nausicaa has internalized the notion of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, behavior, a prerequisite (as Williams observes) for “the very idea of there being a shame *culture*, a coherent system for the regulation of conduct.”³¹

The “internalized other . . . is conceived as someone whose reactions I would respect.” Ajax commits suicide in Sophocles’ play because “he has no

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way of living that anyone he respects would respect—which means that he cannot live with any self-respect.”³² Using Havelock’s work on Democritus and other elder sophists, Peter Rose concludes that the attempt to found a more inner-directed morality precedes Plato’s Socrates:

The process, never complete, by which the traditional shame culture’s ethical terminology was transformed into a set of mental constructs affecting the psyche of an individual apart from witnesses was longer and more complex than Plato suggests. . . . The anthropologically oriented thinkers who explored the origin of ethics in the survival needs of the group also examined the subtle socialization process by which necessary values are internalized in members of the group. They recognized that without some internalization of ethical values no social intercourse is possible, that instead of relations based on persuasion there would be only deceit or brute force.³³

Such an interactive view of Greek moral culture properly complicates the notion of “exteriority.” The act of vision directed at the external world mutually illuminates the world and the viewer. So, too, the tragic character seen by others internalizes (in complicated, socially directed, *and* idiosyncratic ways) that seeing, and comes to see the world through its “eyes.” For Williams, the internalized other in ancient Greek culture need not collapse into one of two reductive extremes, either of a wholly interiorized, or a totally externalized, self. These opposite poles receive powerful instantiations in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*—the solipsistic, inner-directed, self-viewing title character (Hippolytus: “Oh how I wish I could stand in front of myself / and weep at the miseries that I am suffering,” *Hipp.* 1074–75); and his opposite, the outer-directed, fearful of discovery, wholly “social” Phaedra, who commits perjury and suicide to keep up external appearances.³⁴ Put simply, viewing others in their unique situations (assuming they are recognizable and not completely foreign), a Greek can also see himself. Looking on his deranged enemy Ajax, Odysseus says “I pity him . . . not thinking of his fate, but of my own. / I see the all of us who live / are no more than ghostly traces [*eidōla*] or weightless shadows” (*S. Ajax* 121–26).³⁵ Again, we trace the triadic relationship moving from the spatial (visually outward) to the social (recognizable others) to the individual (self), and then back out again (self as potential other).

Although the visual (as physiological process and as metaphor) constitutes an important part of dramatic experience, theatrical space encompasses more than what one sees. Sound, no less than sight, requires a spatial medium, and a resonating space within the body to produce it with sufficient volume to be audible.³⁶ Ancient sources indicate that the voice of the actor proved his most valuable tool; Aristotle calls it “the most imitative [or “performative,” *mimētikōtaton*] of our parts, which provides the basis for the arts of acting and epic recitation.”³⁷ According to Aristotle, the tragic actor The-

odorus forbade other actors to appear before him onstage because “an audience always takes kindly to the first voice that meets the ears.”³⁸ The oral nature of ancient Greek society establishes—with tautological force—that acoustic contact (being in the same acoustic space) constituted the primary mode of communication. Coming upon a silent Hecuba, Agamemnon demonstrates: “Not born a prophet, I can’t track down / the path of your thoughts unless I hear them” (Eur. *Hec.* 743–44).

Even more than what we see, what we hear demands proximity.³⁹ We may look at the stars, for example, but their silence reminds us of their vast distance. We can close our eyes (in the theater, as elsewhere) far more effectively than our ears, as Oedipus discovers after his self-blinding, wishing he could “choke off the spring of hearing” and so move “beyond the reach of evils” (S. *OT* 1386–90). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, we watch the blind hero *hear* the play that happens around him. Humans with sight can select what to look at, but sound surrounds us and pours in whether we like it or not. In “On Thinking and Speaking,” Humboldt argues that the human voice produces “the most decisive of all changes in time. . . . Issuing from man himself with the breath that animates him, and vanishing instantly, they [the temporal changes] are by far the most alive and arousing.”⁴⁰ That is, the presence of the human voice reminds all who hear it that time, *lived* time, is passing.

In Homeric epic, distance frequently is measured by “sound contact.” The temenos of Alcinoos lies “as far off from the city as [a man] could make himself heard by shouting” (*Od.* 6.294), and there are many other examples.⁴¹ Effective language is “winged,” traveling with a purpose like an arrow that hits the target, linking speaker and intended audient. “Unwinged speech” either remains unspoken or fails to achieve its desired effect (*Od.* 17.57, 19.29, 21.386, 22.398). Translated into political terms, Aristotle suggests the absurdity of a city whose population is too large for a herald to address it.⁴²

The open mouth of the Greek theatrical mask provides the requisite passage for the actor’s voice, but it also symbolizes tragedy’s need to bear spoken witness to the unspeakable, to keep talking in the face of horror. To stop speech that will curse, the soldiers gag Iphigenia before they sacrifice her in *Agamemnon* (233–38); in *Hecuba*, an outraged Agamemnon binds Polymestor’s tongue to keep from hearing his unwelcome predictions (*Hec.* 1283–84). Out of sight in Greek tragedy does not mean beyond perception, as the offstage cries of many victims (or near victims) make clear.⁴³ In the same way we should consider other offstage sounds that may have been heard by the audience—the argument within between the Nurse and Hippolytus, for example (Eur. *Hipp.* 565–600), or the first arrival of Philoctetes (S. *Ph.* 201–19). And, of course, the experience of Greek tragedy involved music, with aulos (and occasionally lyre, tambourine, and/or castanet) accompaniment to the lyric sections of the Chorus, to the actor singing alone (monody), and to

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the actor and Chorus singing together (*kommos*). Although we cannot reconstruct the sound, we can identify general moods associated with different instruments and modalities, and detect evocations of the foreign and exotic.⁴⁴ The impact of the visual, vocal, and musical elements of tragedy depended on the space in which they were performed, even as they transformed that space into fictional worlds of great imaginative scope and compass.

If Greek tragic theater is a spatial art, made of sights and sounds in the shared presence of an audience, then we should think hard about the appropriateness of metaphors of text and reading that dominate contemporary critical discourse. From Simon Goldhill's *Reading Greek Tragedy* to Barbara Goff's *The Noose of Words*, recent studies of tragedy emphasize the activity of reading,⁴⁵ an interpretive metaphor that has worked its way into other areas of classical studies. In "Reading" *Greek Death*, for example, Sourvinou-Inwood proposes "methodologies for reading the Greek discourse of death, which involves the reading of texts, images, and archaeological evidence . . . , methodologies capable of allowing us—in so far as this is possible—to read ancient texts through the eyes of their contemporary readers."⁴⁶ The fact that there were few ancient readers seems beside the point.

Even in approaches to tragedy that emphasize staging, metaphors of text, reading, and writing remain prominent. Oliver Taplin's magisterial *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* explicitly addresses Fraenkel's call for a "grammar of dramatic technique," as does Michael Halleran's *Stagecraft in Euripides*, and, on a smaller scale, David Bain's *Masters, Servants and Orders in Greek Tragedy* and Donald Mastronarde's *Contact and Discontinuity*.⁴⁷ In *Tragedy in Athens*, David Wiles strongly criticizes the assumptions underlying Taplin's approach and argues for various structuralist and semiotic readings of tragedy, incorporating ideas from Anne Ubersfeld's *Lire le théâtre*. However, as the title of Ubersfeld's book suggests, the predictable structuralist and poststructuralist practices of reading—decoding, signifying (in the sense of generating meaning by signs), explicating binaries—dominate.⁴⁸ These same interpretive metaphors hold sway in other humanistic disciplines, as scholars convert the world's plenitude into so many "texts" to be "read."⁴⁹

At the first order of approximation, what does reading involve? Whether under a tree or on a subway, in the library or at the airport, or sitting absorbed by the computer monitor, reading in the contemporary world reaches its telos when we are lost in the book or on the screen, and the world outside is kept at bay. Reading silently, an act of private concentration, we cut ourselves off from what is present outside the text; the closer the reading, the narrower the spatial blinders. The magic of writing indicates those parts of the "exterior world" worthy of conscious attention, invoking these externals almost always in their absence.⁵⁰ Hélène Cixous summarizes the process: "We annihilate the world with a book. . . . As soon as you open the book as

a door, you enter another world, you close the door on this world. Reading is escaping in broad daylight, it's the rejection of the other; most of the time it's a solitary act, exactly like writing."⁵¹

To be sure, for the greatest part of its (short) history reading was practiced in public and out loud. Far from an act of isolation, reading took place as a communal event, a shared aural experience, long after the introduction of writing and even of books.⁵² Because listeners, unlike readers, "have to understand in real time," ancient reading depended on live performance, and not the other way around.⁵³ What evidence we have suggests that tragic actors themselves (quite possibly illiterate) learned their parts by hearing them read aloud.⁵⁴ George Steiner and Jonathan Smith pinpoint the rise of the "classic phase" of silent reading in Europe to the seventeenth century, when elites had access to books, space, silence, and leisure.⁵⁵ Places of privilege for silent reading have their counterpart in the modern university, where academics in the humanities extend the metaphor of reading with scarcely a thought to how small a role literacy actually plays in many lives. While students and professors at Stanford University, for example, elucidate the pleasures of the text and define various interpretive communities, 25 percent of the adults in California's Santa Clara County (wealthy Silicon Valley) can be defined as functionally illiterate. A far larger percentage of the world's population has little meaningful access to written language.

Applied to the theater, or to society, or to culture, the metaphor of reading is remarkably exclusive, leaving out much of the phenomena that the metaphor is invoked to explain. Certainly, most classicists in a reflective mood would agree that "tragedy as read" or "society as text" would have made little sense to the population that attended dramatic performances in fifth-century Athens. As A. M. Dale reminds us, "we read lyric poetry, the Greeks watched and listened to it. It is easy for us to forget this simple yet profound difference."⁵⁶ If a playwright failed to direct his own play (as happened with several of Aristophanes' comedies, for example), his name did not appear in the public formalities connected with the production. Athens officially honored the names of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes as *didaskaloi* (directors), not as writers of texts.⁵⁷ Turning to the nontheatrical realm, Charles Hedrick points out that the writing on stone that confronted Athenians (inscriptions on votives, dedications, and grave markers) operated more as monumental reminders than as a texts to be read.⁵⁸ Several scholars have challenged the notion that mass literacy existed in ancient Athens, whose traditional agrarian economy required no general reading public and supported no state-sponsored formal schooling to promote one.⁵⁹

Be that as it may, focusing on texts (and, by extension, the world as text) offers critics unquestionable power. Due to the trapped nature of written language, we can detach the interpretive process from its moorings in ongoing experience. Technologically speaking, this power increased dramatically

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with the transition from the papyrus roll (where going back was no easy task—how would a reader locate the passage without unrolling the whole thing?) to the codex, with its sheets bound much like a modern book.⁶⁰ The grammarians of Alexandria were among the first to demonstrate the great critical advantages that accrue from a book we can easily “manipulate,” giving us control over any prior context for the words we read. Changes from the ancient *scriptura continua* to the “canonical separation” of words in Latin manuscripts (achieved in the twelfth-century) played a major role in spurring the change to silent reading.⁶¹

The book’s power over space yields power over time—that is, over the original sequencing of plot, narrative, and argument. We can rearrange texts as we choose, without regard for their original context. This practice constitutes a major aspect of the interpretive act, a recasting of the tale more to the critic’s purposes, generating new narratives by de- and recontextualizing the parts of someone else’s. Flipping through the world of the book, we manifest a godlike power to suspend or reverse time. Indeed, only death need end our spinning out narratives about other narratives, should we so choose.⁶² Something like this happens when we turn the study of plays into the interpretation of texts meant to be read; we ignore the insistent ephemerality at the heart of theatrical performance, the ineluctable concomitant of its spatial life.⁶³

Missing in a text-driven approach is the simple fact that theatrical space demands *presence*—the simultaneous presence of performers and audience.⁶⁴ The actor’s body in a given space before an attendant audience is the *sine qua non* of theatrical life. When the actor succeeds, that body moves from being present to being a presence; he or she is “there on the night,” “takes the stage,” “lights up the theater,” “fills the space.” After a bad performance, the actor “didn’t show up tonight, but phoned it in.” Metaphors of absence mark the performance as a failure.

Most theater practitioners—in my experience, a highly eclectic lot—think of dramatic performance in radically untextual terms. The space of the theater allows for something to come to life in the flesh, and in that process imagination and creativity merge with unshakable (and often brutal) realities of theatrical production. In the case of Greek tragedy, and much drama that followed, what comes to presence manifests itself in the form of named characters or groups of characters enacting a narrative in space and time. Without falling into mimetic quicksand, most theater artists recognize something intractably human about this enterprise. Translated into semiotic terms, the presence of a visible and audible actor in real time performing a character in a recognizably human situation brings too much information to the interpretive task, complicating our best efforts to reduce dramatic action to the level of “text” constituted by readable but arbitrary signs.⁶⁵

To be sure, scholars isolate costume, gesture, design, theater architecture, lighting, movement, music, dramaturgy, speech, acting, directing, and so on,

deriving from each a specific set of codes and meanings. For some critics, the living world represented on stage simply poses a code to be cracked, as when Barthes characterizes the theater as “a kind of cybernetic machine.”⁶⁶ Such categorizing and decoding, however, runs the risk of laboratory dissection, which leaves little but the proverbial dead rat, as phenomenologists remind us. Husserl observes that when “the spatial thing which we see is . . . perceived, we are consciously aware of it as given in its *embodied form*. We are not given an image or a sign *in its place*. We must not substitute the consciousness of a sign or an image for a perception.” Bachelard puts it more simply: “Sight says too many things at one time.”⁶⁷

For all of its pedigree in continental philosophy, the phenomenology of theatrical performance emerges as less conceptual than physical, involving human bodies, voices, sights, sounds, gestures, objects—“the roar of the greasepaint and smell of the crowd,” in American musical parlance. Even in the *Poetics*—increasingly viewed as a text that undervalues performance—Aristotle understands tragedy’s “move to presence” as a mark of its development from epic *mimēsis* (1448a19–29). Nagy reminds us that, for the ancients including Aristotle, the term *mimēsis* implied performance (understood as enactment and reenactment) rather than imitation, as later thinkers would have it.⁶⁸ In this context, Aristotle traces a development from straight narrative to the mixed mode found in Homer (narrative plus the dramatizing of first-person speech) and finally to the fully dramatic mode of tragedy, where characters speak for themselves. Here he follows his teacher Plato, who differentiates dramatic from other types of poetry by its consisting completely of speeches in the first person.⁶⁹ As Aristotle puts it, “Some say that’s why they’re called ‘dramas’ [*dramata* ‘things done’], because they imitate those who do things [*drōntas*]” (*Po.* 1448a28–29). Although Aristotle focuses on the *absence* of the poet or storyteller in tragedy, that absence makes room for the presence of the actor, who instantiates a “present” experience that the storyteller can only recall. Put schematically, spatial presence entails the temporal present; in semiotic terms, the actor in Greek tragedy is less a sign than a symbol, not simply a pointer to what is absent but also an embodiment of what is present.⁷⁰

The attack on presence—quintessentially captured in Derrida’s counterintuitive and antihistorical claim that writing comes before speaking—displaces present oral and gestural communication with mediated “texts” as the fundamental site of human interaction.⁷¹ In this well-worn scenario, writing and reading expose the absence at the heart of language signs. Actually present are only arbitrary marks on a page, accepted as meaning something (and not something else) by convention or fiat. Deconstructing such an arbitrary construction is meant to constitute an act of liberation. One steps out from under the authority of external referentiality *and* the author who pretends to control it, moving into the free play of the signifier; each reader is free to

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undermine a true(r) reading by concentrating on the polysemous possibilities inherent in language, a system that refers ultimately only to itself. Saussure, the purported source for the deconstructionist view of language, seems to have had nothing like this in mind. As Raymond Tallis reminds us, “When Saussure compared signifiers and signifieds to currency denominations [whose value is internal to the currency system], he did not imply that words in use were like pound coins that could purchase only other pound coins and never buy real goods.”⁷² It remains an important political question why academics so fervently embraced this version of language over communitarian and universalist notions propounded by “nativists” like Noam Chomsky.⁷³

Explicitly or not, those who view the world (or that part of the world presented in the theater) as a text to be read tend to adopt what linguist Steven Pinker calls the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM).⁷⁴ This view of human perception and cognition denies that significant influence emanates from the human organism prior to enculturated experience. We are what we are fed (mentally and physically), and we can be fed—and presumably digest—more or less anything. The dominant issue in the SSSM scenario (Foucault explores it in detail) involves not meaning or truth, but power. Critics riding this juggernaut, as Peter Dews points out, seem hell-bent to “dissolve any supposedly intrinsic significance of lived experience into an effect of impersonal structures and forces.”⁷⁵ Paraphrasing Rousseau, in the SSSM the mind is a blank tablet onto which culture inscribes its various meanings and maladies. To adopt a favorite metaphor of the post-modern, “minds don’t write, they are written on.” The undocinated mind—understood as a universal aspect of human beings—simply does not exist. In this view, as the anthropologist Dan Sperber notes with incredulity, “the mind imposes no greater constraints on the contents of cultures than does printing technology on the contents of books.”⁷⁶

How are these observations relevant to space as a proper value of the theater? Perhaps we can identify qualities intrinsic to space and our perception of it that resist the reading-writing-text paradigm and the attendant SSSM of the inscribed mind. What lies before us in the theater may carry messages available to most observers and constitutes a shared world for perception. “Though visions are many, the visible may yet be one,” as Robert Brandom puts it.⁷⁷ If not, then “space” in tragedy becomes another version of a social-science construction, following a postmodern critical strategy that a skeptic might call “hyberbolic substitution”—for “text” read “space,” which proves on examination to be (always already) the biggest text of all. Not surprisingly, this process is well in train, as evidenced by the proliferation of critical studies on the theater with “space” in the title. There we can read cultural givens and ideological constraints—all the “effects of impersonal structures and forces”—writ large.⁷⁸

Whatever else it may do, the present book does not pursue this critical gambit. Instead, I make use of “nontextual” ways that people have thought about space, starting with a version of perceptual realism championed by the cognitive psychologist James J. Gibson. After years of research on vision (from young babies recognizing “breaks” in their crawl surface to studies of how best to train airplane pilots), Gibson developed an “ecological approach to visual perception,” the title of his summary work. In so doing, he categorically dismisses the utility of space as a concept: “The doctrine that we could not perceive the world around us unless we already had the concept of space is nonsense. It is quite the other way around. We could not conceive of empty space unless we could see the ground under our feet and the sky above. Space is a myth, a ghost, a fiction for geometers.”⁷⁹

Although I assume the usefulness of space as an interpretive category, Gibson’s analysis of perception deserves close attention, primarily because it situates the human perceiver (as does Greek tragedy) in the physical world and not in the mental space of reading or the semiotic space of signal decoding. Gibson’s realism starts with the obvious but neglected fact that we are terrestrial creatures surrounded by an environment that offers essential information for our survival and well-being. An environment is characterized by its stability, which is why it is worth knowing about—“the persisting surfaces of the environment are what provide the framework of [visual] reality.”⁸⁰ Its layout appears to us visually as a flow of information structured by the reflected light that reaches our eyes, what Gibson calls “the ambient optical array.” This information *consists of* invariants underlying change,⁸¹ making perception “an act of attention, not a triggered impression, an achievement, not a reflex.”⁸² Chief among these invariants is the ground, the literal basis of our environment, extending under and supporting other invariants, namely the people, places, and things that we perceive in our world.⁸³

We see “not with the eyes but with the eyes-in-the-head-on-the-body-resting-on-the-ground.”⁸⁴ Normal perception is not a pair of eyeballs isolated in a dark room looking at slides, as most laboratory experiments on visual perception assume. We don’t perceive an abstracted reality, as in a snapshot, or view the world like a picture, or read it like a book. Rather, we see surfaces, continuities, breaks, edges, obstacles, openings, paths—potential routes for movement and barriers to get around. Moving from one place to another involves the opening up of the vista ahead and the closing in of the vista behind: “A living observer is never frozen in the vista of a moment. Perceiving is sequential. . . . One sees around corners because one can go around corners in the course of time [and someone who has gone behind a surface can reemerge from it]. The concept of the arrested image has misled us. The static picture is not the basic element of visual perception.”⁸⁵ Problems of visual “integration” via memory (the mistaken idea that recognition resembles taking photos of the world and comparing them with earlier photos,

filed in the brain) disappear when we realize that “no succession of discrete images occurs, either in scanning or looking around. . . . [T]he scene is *in* the sequence, is specified by the invariant structure that underlies the samples of the ambient array.”⁸⁶

Gibson emphasizes that normal human perception is mobile, connected to our animal need to locate and orient ourselves for purposes of survival and well-being. We perceive the world (visually, aurally, kinesthetically, olfactorally, haptically) with our heads on our necks, aware of our own bodies by virtue of their being within our perceptual field. Visual “proprioception” begins with our noses, due to the inset location of our eyes (contrast a horse), but it normally extends to our limbs, as I observe my arms and hands when I type, for example, or my shoulder when I turn my head to look for a book. Proprioception also includes the information we pick up from the environment, available in what we see, locating and orienting ourselves as we move through the world. As Gibson puts it, “the perception of the environment is always accompanied by co-perception of the self. . . . [E]goreception accompanies exteroception like two sides of a coin.”⁸⁷

The visual information structured in the ambient optic array reveals objects that offer various *affordances*, Gibson’s term for what the environment provides or furnishes us, understood as a possession neither of the physical world nor of those who perceive that world, but rather as the complementarity of creature and surroundings:

What a thing is and what it *means* are not separate, the former being physical and the latter mental, as we are accustomed to believe. The perception of what a thing is and the perception of what it means are not separate, either. To perceive that a surface is level and solid is also to perceive that it is walk-on-able [i.e., that it “affords” walking].⁸⁸

What something affords is related directly to one’s situation—for example, for someone in a car, a highway affords driving; for someone out of gas, it affords a path for walking to an emergency phone; for someone walking a dog, it affords a dangerous environment.⁸⁹

Applied to the ancient Athenian audience, the outdoor theater of Dionysus afforded a sloping terrain on which to sit, a place to view part of the city, an open space where one was visible oneself, a place to see the dramatic performances and participate in one of the great civic festivals, and so on. Applied to a given tragedy, the idea of affordances can play into the changing dynamics of the drama. The humiliated Ajax in Sophocles’ play, for example, no longer perceives the sword of Hector as a status gift befitting a war hero. Instead, the sword reverts to its original function, affording Ajax the means to fall by an enemy weapon and so assume the appearance of a hero’s death in a world that has lost its heroic values. By fixing its hilt in the Trojan earth,

Ajax converts a detached object (“a layout of surfaces completely surrounded by the medium . . . that can be moved without breaking or rupturing the continuity of any surface”) into an attached object (whose substance “is continuous with the substance of another surface,” in this case the ground).⁹⁰ In his suicide, Ajax attaches his body to the hostile land he has helped to conquer. The Chorus in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (454–55) describes the similar “attachment” of other Greeks who fell at Troy: “now lovely bodies hold the land they won” (*Ag.* 454–55).

Unlike the abstract space of geometry, consisting of points located in a coordinate system, Gibson’s “ecological space” consists of *places*, located by their inclusion in larger places. The perception of smaller units embedded in larger ones Gibson calls “nesting.”⁹¹ In the context of ancient performance, the theater of Dionysus is located in the sanctuary dedicated to the god on the south slope of the Acropolis within the walled portion of Athens on the Attic peninsula, part of the Greek mainland, which is part of the Mediterranean world, and so on, each place nested within a larger region (places can be named but they need not have sharp boundaries). We naturally see things as components of other things, due to the fact that our vision is ambient and continuous, not static, broken, or abstracted.

In the same way, Gibson insists that we see not “depth” but rather one thing behind another. Perception is “an experiencing of things rather than the having of experiences.”⁹² This means that there exists not merely a metaphorical path through life but a real one, moving from place to place. Every real animal follows a single real route through the real environment in real time; *mutatis mutandis*, dramatic characters in performance do the same.⁹³ So, too, did those attending the theater in ancient Athens, tracing out various paths from their homes to the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus, then through the theater’s *parodoi* and up to their seats, where they enjoyed a vista overlooking the paths they had come and by which they would return home after the performances.

In general terms, Gibson’s analysis of the way we visually “keep in touch with the world” emphasizes the universal aspects of visual perception. In part, this results from the adaptation of human cognitive and perceptual categories to the environment, as Konrad Lorenz notes, “for the same reason that the horse’s hoof is suited for the plains before the horse is born, and the fin of a fish is adapted for water before the fish hatches from its egg.”⁹⁴ We bring common perceptual capacities to the world, due to our biological endowment, *and* we take common information from the world, due to the affordances we perceive in the environment: “People are not only *parts* of the environment but also *perceivers* of the environment. Hence a given observer perceives other perceivers. And he also perceives *what* others perceive. In this way each observer is aware of a shared environment, one that is common to

all observers, not just *his* environment.⁹⁵ Because we are mobile and can turn our heads, we have the ability to see objects and places from another person's standpoint.

Although our perceptions can be identical, our "sensations" (stimuli preceding perception) can never be, at least not simultaneously. For example, I can't occupy your point of view now, but I could have in the past and might in the future. Put differently, our visual system can substitute sequential vision for panoramic vision, successive order for adjacent order, space for time.⁹⁶ Gibson challenges the idea that perception is a private affair, whereas knowledge—due to common language and culture—is shared:

Even the direct perception of objects and surfaces is shared over time because of common points of observation and the ability to see from other points than the one now occupied. . . . The awareness of a common world . . . is not entirely due to our verbal agreements with one another, as so many philosophers are tempted to believe. It is also due to *the independence of our perception from a fixed point of observation, the ability to pick up invariants over time*. This underlies the ability to get knowledge by means of pictures and words. The social psychology of knowledge has a basis in ecological optics.⁹⁷

Considered in terms of the theater, Gibson's observations offer useful insights into the conditions of performance in ancient Athens, the subject of chapter 1. From their different perspectives, members of the audience viewed one another and the common world before them. The ground of the theater was both the location of the performance (the orchestra floor, where the actors played) and also part of the larger perceptual layout, the continuous surface (real ground) that lay beneath the audience and extended past the city and the surrounding landscape to the horizon.⁹⁸ We may contrast this sense of theatrical ground with our experience in a contemporary indoor theater, visually cut off from the earth and most of the natural world, where we confront a raised stage, artificial lights, and a completely constructed environment.⁹⁹

Gibson's observations about the importance of permanence within change—the way we pick up information by perceiving invariants in our physical environment—apply metaphorically to dramatic characterization: "The identity of a thing, its constancy, can emerge in perception only when it is observed under changing circumstances in various aspects. The static form of a thing, its image or picture, is not at all what is permanent about it."¹⁰⁰ The "heroic temper" frequently associated with Sophoclean protagonists shows itself by a character's constancy in the face of changing circumstances, by the use of dramatic foils (the title characters of *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* as opposed to Ismene, Chrysothemis, and Creon, respectively), and by the simple fact that the same actor plays the character over

the course of the performance. Similarly, for all their apparent fixity, the masks worn by the characters come to full dramatic life only when seen against the changing events the character faces.¹⁰¹

Turning to physical movement, in Gibson's terms the theater of Dionysus affords paths and obstacles to the performers in the form of the side entrances, *skēnē* facade, central doorway, the seated audience, and so on. Recall that the *eisodoi* afford audience and actors alike ambulatory access to the theater, and in the latter case the affordance extends to characters arriving on carts (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Euripides' *Trojan Women*), chariots (in Aeschylus' *Persians*, Euripides' *Electra*), biers (Sophocles' *Trachiniae*; Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Hippolytus*, *Suppliant Women*), and so on. At key moments in the drama, an opening can convert to a barrier, and vice versa, perhaps best exemplified in the coup de theatre at the close of Euripides' *Medea*. Hoping to save his sons from Medea's vengeance, Jason runs onstage to find the entrance to the house locked, barring him from the place he once ruled as lord and master. As he pounds vainly at the door, the barrier that keeps him from his sons, a miraculous passage opens above for the triumphant Medea, who appears with her dead children in the chariot of the sun. In this spatial transformation, Euripides exposes Jason's earthbound impotence before the power of a semidivine Medea.

A related aspect of motion in the theater involves what Gibson calls "occlusion," when a person moves behind a surface. We take in information as that movement occurs, such that we perceive (for example) the teacher who sits down behind her desk, although part of her body is occluded. As Gibson puts it, "the persistence of an object is specified by invariants of structure, not by the persistence of stimulation."¹⁰² We don't "remember" that the teacher has legs, we perceive them, because we see what we have seen and are seeing, even though the desk blocks the visual stimulation we can isolate as "legs." The same can apply to cases of total occlusion—when my girlfriend steps behind the shower curtain, she is no longer visible, but her position in the environment is fully specified. "Thus the fact that objects continue to exist after they go out of sight can be *seen*; it need not be inferred." Recent experiments testing for the perception of object permanence in four-month-old babies supports this conclusion, contrary to the view (entrenched in popular culture) championed by Jean Piaget. Disappearing acts surprise all of us, babies and adults: out of sight is not out of mind.¹⁰³ When the magician removes the screen and the elephant is not there, we are surprised; it looks "impossible."

I know of no such disappearing acts in Greek tragedy, but characters do enter and exit (move in and out of occlusion) with different degrees of audience perception. In *Agamemnon*, for example, Clytemnestra appears at the central doorway (perhaps on the *ekkuklēma*) after the offstage murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Her appearance does not surprise the audience

because we perceive where she was—inside the palace, albeit “out of sight.” We don’t remember suddenly that she had been waiting within; we perceived it all along. However, when Aegisthus enters from the *eisodos* two hundred lines later, it is a complete surprise. We may reason after the fact that Aegisthus must have been lurking in the background all the time, but we have never seen him onstage before. Unlike Clytemnestra’s entrances, Aegisthus’ arrival startles, and his physical presence destabilizes the drama, bringing on the next play of the trilogy. Moving in and out of occlusion constitutes a simple but significant dramatic resource in the ancient theater, one that articulates with Gibson’s “ecological” sense of object permanence.

Another visual aspect of Greek tragedy that benefits from Gibson’s analysis involves the purposes and means of scene painting (*skēnographia*) in the ancient theater. A (possibly interpolated) passage in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (49a18–19) credits Sophocles with the invention of scene painting, and scholars have speculated on its perspectival nature, assuming that painted Renaissance perspective marks an advance over the indexical signaling of place that characterizes most Greek art. In Attic vase painting, for example, a palm tree signals Delos, an altar means a sanctuary, a door stands for a house. This visual economy, based on a conventionalized metonymy, proved far more important to Greek painting than the development of linear perspective. Moreover, the problem with a single focused perspective for ancient scene painting is precisely that—given its size and shape, the theater of Dionysus offers anything but a single, frontal point-of-view. As a result, Ruth Padel’s claim that fifth-century scene painting reflected perspectival architectural drawing seems forced.¹⁰⁴ The natural background of the city and landscape makes painted perspective irrelevant; moreover, the bodily motion of characters entering and leaving by the central entrance and the *parodoi*, would rupture any trompe l’oeil effects painted on the facade. Gibson views the artificial fixed-point perspective of the Renaissance as a second-order phenomenon, where the framed optic array comes from a fixed, flat picture to the (properly placed) eye; however, the “natural perspective” of ancient optics (present in the Greek theater and unaffected by scene painting, if I am right) represents the first-order phenomenon, where the ambient optic array comes directly from the world to the eye.¹⁰⁵

Gibson offers useful insights into the visual perception called into play in a large outdoor space like the theater of Dionysus in Athens. A second “spatial thinker” who provides interpretive help is the gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin, whose notion of “hodological” space seems particularly appropriate to Greek tragedy. Hodological implies roads or paths, the root *hodos* present in the Greek word *eisodos* ‘way in’ (used by Aristophanes of the side entrance-ways into the theater), *exodos* ‘way out’ (applied in Old Comedy to the chorus’s final exit), and *parodos* ‘side way’ (the term for the entrance song of the chorus).¹⁰⁶ For Lewin, hodological space is space that matters, paths that

tie people together or distances that keep them apart—put simply, direction to and from. The basic pattern of arrival and departure in the Greek theater—the interpretive basis for Oliver Taplin’s groundbreaking study *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*—lends itself to Lewin’s psychological view of space.¹⁰⁷ We might contrast Lewin’s gestalt sense of space as a medium of connection with that of a “modernist” like Proust, who viewed space as a primal quality that keeps things from coming together, manifesting a cruel separation at the heart of things.¹⁰⁸ Speaking broadly, Greek tragedy prefers Lewin’s hodological connectedness but sees it (and not Proustian separation) as the source of potential tragedy.

Finally, in a short essay entitled “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault introduces the useful idea of a *heterotopia*—a space freed from the normal constraints of time, either by accumulating it (like a cemetery or museum) or by liberating it, “time in the mode of festival” (fleeting, transitory, precarious). For Foucault, heterotopias provide a space for play, fantasy, and deviance (a Club Med resort, a cruise ship, a brothel), or its opposite, a meticulous space whose orderly arrangement contrasts with our jumbled reality (a Puritan settlement in North America, an early Jesuit colony in Paraguay).¹⁰⁹ Of the latter sort, we might imagine a Disney theme park or perfectly run retirement center (with all-weather climate control); of the former, we might include a leather bar, the empty apartment in Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*, a rock festival. Xouthus in Euripides’ *Ion*, for instance, recalls the Delphi of his youth as such a heterotopia. There, at the biennial festival to Dionysus, he slept with a Delphian girl and (he wrongly thinks) fathered Ion. We might extend the notion generally—at least from the audience’s perspective—to the theater of Dionysus, where Athenians enjoyed festival license sanctioned by the god, subsidized by the *polis*, and performed within the confines of their city. Here we come upon what Foucault calls “those singular spaces . . . found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even opposite of others.”¹¹⁰ The concept of heterotopia suggests that a given space might escape the spatial assumptions that seem preordained by those committed to the Standard Social Science Model.

In chapter 1 I use the observations just outlined to discuss the theater of Dionysus and what Lefebvre calls “spatial practice,” the way fifth-century Athenians conceived the interlocking spaces—domestic, sacred (or “sacralizing”), political, and geographical—in which they made their lives. In chapters 2 through 6, I examine specific tragedies, organized in what I take to be viable (but by no means exclusive) spatial patterns:

Space for return: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Euripides’ *Heracles*.

Eremetic space: Sophocles’ *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*; Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*.

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Space and the body: Euripides' *Hecuba*, *Electra*, *Bacchae*.

Space, time, and memory: Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Space and the "other": Aeschylus' *Persians*, Euripides' *Medea*.

It will become clear in the discussion that these spatial categories neither limit nor exhaust a given play (e.g., *Persians* is also a "return" play), but suggest a dominant motif regarding space and its transformation within the drama. In the appendix, I return to the question, What is space? discussing the views of early Greek thinkers around the time of the theater's rise. In the process, I suggest ways in which philosophical and scientific conceptions of space might help us understand what happened in the ancient theater.

The discussion of specific plays draws on six spatial categories that I consider basic to the theater of Dionysus in Athens: theatrical space, scenic space, extrascenic space, distanced space, self-referential space, and reflexive space.¹¹¹

The theater becomes a *theatrical space* when it "houses" a dramatic performance, that is, when the other spaces come into play. The term refers specifically to the spatial constraints and opportunities offered by the fifth-century theater. The physical nature of those theatrical givens has spurred significant controversy (about orchestra shape, the *skēnē* facade, the presence and function of an orchestra altar, the existence of a raised stage), which I address in chapter 1, within the context of other Athenian civic spaces.

My second category, *scenic space*, involves the setting of a tragedy, specified by the facade with central entrance, by scenic elements (an altar or tomb, painted backdrops, significant props), and by references in the text (the cave of *Philoctetes*, the tent of *Ajax*, the house of Atreus in *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, the temple of Apollo at Delphi in *Eumenides*, and so on). Even these examples force us to recognize how flexible and mutable scenic space can be. In *Ajax* the scene shifts from the hero's tent in the Greek camp at Troy to an isolated beach, where *Ajax*' suicide takes place. Although visually present, the palace in *Choephoroi* remains virtually "absent" during the first half of the play, where the action focuses on the grave of Agamemnon. We find no evidence that the palace looks out onto Agamemnon's grave in any but a symbolic sense. In *Eumenides*, the temple of Apollo at Delphi provides the original setting, but the action soon shifts to Athens—first to the site of Athena's cult image on the Acropolis, then to the court on the Areopagus. In other words, even when the scenic space seems fixed by the facade, a completely different scene may be created without any fundamental change in what the audience literally sees.¹¹² This basic theatrical fact applies all the more to tragedies that are not set before built structures, such as *Oedipus at Colonus*. Here, for example, the area near the facade represents the outdoor grove of the Furies, from which the Chorus insists that *Oedipus* leave, draw-

ing him toward the center of the orchestra, a “public meeting area” (*leschē*, OC 167).¹¹³

In spite of plays like *Eumenides* and *Ajax*, which clearly mark their change of scene, and the scenic flexibility manifest in dramas like *Choephoroi*, the modern notion of the theater as an empty space does not fit Greek tragedy. Such free play, without preexisting spatial associations and coordinates, diffuses the dramatic focus that tragedy strives to achieve. Scenic space *defines* the place of a given tragedy, although it can do so with greater or less specificity, as in *Orestes*, where the scene seems to shift between inside and outside the house of Atreus.¹¹⁴ In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, on the other hand, the fact that the background constantly remains the house of the Labdacids is of signal importance in rooting the protagonist to his unrecognized home. It is significant that the action of *Philoctetes* unfolds within and without the hero’s violated cave and not anywhere on Lemnos. The house of Admetus provides the essential background for the strange events of *Alcestis*, from the exchange between Apollo and Thanatos at the outset to Alcestis’ miraculous return at the end, brought home to the husband and house for which she had died.

Related to the stage setting is my third category, *extrascenic space*, lying immediately offstage, behind and contiguous to the facade—the palace interior in *Agamemnon*, or the cavernous space of *Cyclops*’ cave. Frequently a messenger evokes a specific area, as (for example) the Messenger in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who describes the bedroom where Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his sight. The tragedians also could reveal extrascenic space by showing it literally on the *ekklēma*, as when the mad hero in *Heracles* appears bound to a pillar of the home he has destroyed.

Regarding offstage space generally, Lefebvre puns on the “seen and the obscene,” implying that what lies immediately offstage is psychically dangerous and must be kept out of sight. In a similar vein, Ruth Padel sees tragedy’s expulsion on the *ekklēma* of what lies within as a visual metaphor for exposing the hidden workings of the mind, demonstrating the difficulty of describing mental processes without resorting to interiority (which Vernant considers inappropriate for the ancient Greeks):

This is the theater exulting in possibilities of relating inside to outside, unseen to seen, private inner experience to the external watching and guessing of others. . . . [The house offers] an image of the self. . . . [The] single central door . . . makes the genre’s supreme doubleness apparent. . . . The inside and outside of the theater’s space offers the watching imagination a way of thinking about the inside and outside of other structures important to tragedy: city, house, self. The performance of tragedy [is] articulated through spatial dualities.¹¹⁵

Critical interest in these dualities has, of course, informed structuralist readings of Greek tragedy, but we should be wary of overly dualistic schemes.

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For all its simplicity, Greek tragedy involves more than the psychological dualism of conscious and unconscious (or “the repressed”), and it includes far more spatial play than that suggested by contemporary accounts of the onstage and offstage polarity, with its homologous twins outside and inside, public and private, exposed and hidden, male and female, *polis* and *oikos*, and so on.¹¹⁶ In her valuable study *The Family in Greek History*, Cynthia Patterson reminds us that the oft-repeated “dichotomous equations public/private = state/family = male/female = history/nonhistory” do *not* describe or account for the ancient Greek family.¹¹⁷ Similarly, ancient theatrical practice suggests that the Greeks held a much more interactive, permeable, and transformative notion of space than the modern scholars who study them.

With this in mind, my fourth category—*distanced space*—refers to space that bears no immediate relationship to the scenic givens that provide the setting. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, Corinth, Cithairon, the oracle at Delphi, and the junction of the three roads all have a vivid presence, but none lies in the scenic or extrascenic realms. They are distanced, in that they lie beyond the theatrical and scenic areas visible to the audience. Whereas extrascenic space affords exits and entrances through the central door, distanced space provides for arrivals and departures via the *eisodoi* leading into the orchestra.¹¹⁸ In the case of divinities, arrival and departure may occur on high—by alighting from and flying off on the “crane-machine” (*mēchanē*), or by appearing on or descending from the roof of the facade.¹¹⁹ Such arrivals remind us that the setting of a Greek tragedy is contained within larger spaces, which frequently are linked to wisdom and power, both divine and human. These distant places can emerge with special force when evoked by a “focal” character, one who serves as “a centre of sympathetic attention.”¹²⁰ Cassandra in *Agamemnon* exemplifies such a “spatial carrier,” evoking the fate of far-off Troy even as she embodies it on stage.

We can divide distanced space usefully into the subcategories of local, foreign, and divine (or mythic) places, each implying further physical distance from the scenic space and greater difficulty in bridging that distance. In Euripides’ *Electra*, for example, as well as the scenic space of the Farmer’s cottage, and the extrascenic space of its interior (the site of Clytemnestra’s murder), we meet several local distanced spaces in Argos. Radiating outward, these include the well where Electra fetches water; the fields where the Farmer leaves to work; the sanctuary of the Heraion, where the Chorus is headed to celebrate Hera’s festival; the rural homestead where the old Tutor keeps his flocks and from whence he arrives with food; the meadow where Aegisthus sacrifices to the nymphs, intruded upon by Orestes and Pylades; and the palace of Argos from whence Clytemnestra arrives (via chariot) with her servants. Foreign spaces include Phocis, from whence Orestes returns with Pylades, and places linked to Troy. The Trojan War seems to merge

foreign and mythic distanced space, until the Dioscuri appear on the machine and Castor announces that the war was fought for a phantom. The fact that Helen never went to Troy effectively “voids” that distanced space, overturning its relation to the myth, a transformation already suggested by the play’s setting. Recall that *Electra* opens not at the palace, as we might expect, but before a rural cottage, where the heroine lives in rags as the wife of a poor farmer. The interplay between and among these various spaces supports a radical reworking of the story of Troy and its aftermath, discussed in chapter 4.

If the previous spatial categories move progressively outward to include further and further reaches, my fifth category, *self-referential* or *metatheatrical space*, returns us to the theatrical playing area as such. Here, the playwright momentarily foregrounds the fact of dramatic performance by alluding to theatrical representation, musical accompaniment, and choral dance; by parodying dramatic and other performance genres; by employing quasi-direct address to the audience; by manipulating various “plots within plots”; and so on. Consider, for example, the emergence of self-referential space following Agave’s arrival in the *Bacchae*. She carries the mask of Pentheus, which represents both her son’s head and (in her delusion) that of the lion she has killed. Euripides reinforces the spatial play between the theater and its fictive setting by having the actor who previously played Pentheus now play the mother who murdered him. Similarly, the recognition scene in Euripides’ *Electra* draws on and mocks the parallel scene in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, encouraging the audience to view the reunion of Orestes and Electra against its earlier theatrical representation. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, when the Chorus asks, *ti dei me choreuein*; (“Why should I dance?” OT 896), it calls into question the function of the festival performance itself. If, as the Chorus fears at the moment, there exists no meaningful link between the divine forces of the cosmos and human actions, then why bother to dance in the gods’ honor? For the audience, the logical question becomes, Why gather to watch?¹²¹ In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, self-referential space opens up new, and troubling, issues for the audience.

In my view the metatheatrical aspect in Greek tragedy does not operate primarily on an aesthetic level (delight in theatrical play for its own sake), nor does it signal a “crisis of representation,” where the drama refers to its own (and other) performances and little else.¹²² Rather, when Greek tragedy points to its own operations, the audience develops a flexibility of seeing that draws it further into the process by which meanings emerge and the narrative has an effect. The spectators view tragedy with an increasing sense of their own relationship to the action, not because of the subject matter but because of the mode by which the subject matter comes to life.

My final category, *reflexive space*, extends the idea of a critically alert audience, suggesting that the fifth-century theater offered a space for civic reflec-

tion and self-awareness, part of the relationship between tragedy and Athenian democracy.¹²³ By using various anachronisms (political, legal, cultural) and incorporating Athens into the plot, tragedy draws the fifth-century city and its audience into the drama. Discussing Shakespeare's history plays, Rackin observes that anachronisms "break the frame of historical representation" and thereby "dissolve the distance between past events and present audience in the eternal present of dramatic performance."¹²⁴ By "cracking open" the time of the play, if you will, the Greek tragedian opened up its spaces as well, allowing the drama to "spill over . . . into the *polis* at large," as Halliburton puts it.¹²⁵ Among examples of reflexive space, consider the Athenian-like popular assembly hinted at in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (365–75, 516–23, 600–624) and *Agamemnon* (844–47, 1409–14, 1352–55, 1615–16), elaborated more fully in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*; dramatic scenes built around the form and vocabulary of fifth-century lawcourts (the trial of Orestes in *Eumenides*, the ersatz trials of Helen in *Trojan Women* and Polymestor in *Hecuba*, and the trial-influenced scenes in Sophocles' two Oedipus plays); evocations of contemporary social and performance practice, as in the monstrous symposium in *Cyclops*, or the epinician for Orestes in Euripides' *Electra*; and—most significantly—the movement of the action to Athens, the very city where the tragedies were performed, in *Eumenides*, *Medea*, *Heracles*, *Ion*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.¹²⁶

Unlike the concept of the "metatheatrical" (an idea based on the implicit doubleness of *all* dramatic representation), reflexive space emerges when tragedy takes on a strongly fifth-century flavor, or a speaker alludes to contemporary political concerns, or when the theater evokes other public spaces, like the Athenian lawcourts or the assembly. Redfield proposes the interesting counterargument that tragedy used contemporary material "to lead the audience into the reality of the legend." By adopting a kind of theatrical naturalism, the plays make the old myths appear more reasonable and relevant: Sophocles' Oedipus becomes believable because he behaves like Pericles, not because *Oedipus Tyrannus* has anything particular to say about the Athenian leader.¹²⁷ But surely the process works both ways. Tragedians use myth to explore the world of the audience; they do not simply exploit the world of the audience to justify myth. Far from producing an alienating effect, the evocation of reflexive space brings the experience of the play closer to those who have gathered to watch it. This capacity arises in part from the paradoxical fact that tragedy presents a heroic and not a fifth-century setting, an "elsewhere" in time and space that creates distance from the local and avoids the dangers and difficulties of direct political engagement. But there is more to the story, as Easterling points out: "If distance were all that mattered, it would be just as effective to use an anonymous and unlocalized 'once upon a time,' whereas here [in tragedy] the specific echoing of the language, characters, and stories of epic—and lyric—poetry is

taken to quite elaborate lengths of allusiveness and opens up multiple ironic possibilities."¹²⁸

To help understand how the play between—and among—these spatial categories might operate, let us look briefly at Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. The tragedy takes place before the temple of Demeter at Eleusis, indicated by the *skēnē* facade with a central doorway. The text provides information about the scenic space, particularly the presence of an altar to Demeter, located in the center of the orchestra (33–34, 291).¹²⁹ Although visibly prominent at the outset, the facade affords not a single entrance or exit during the play, a unique occurrence in a tragedy where a facade is acknowledged as present.¹³⁰ In the terms adopted here, no extrascenic space materializes behind the facade, meaning that we see only arrivals from, and departures to, various distanced spaces, including the following:

1. The local environs of Athens, which eventually take over the scenic space of Eleusis. These are signaled by Theseus' arrival from the city and return with his mother, his visit (with Adrastus and the sons) to the Athenian assembly, and his departure to muster the Athenian troops for battle.
2. The foreign cities of Thebes and Argos. The Theban Herald, the Messenger, and Theseus (returning from Thebes with the corpses) all arrive from Thebes and help create it in the audience's imagination. As for Argos, the canceled entry of the Argive suppliants at the outset brings Argos to the stage, as does the strange arrival of Evadne and Iphis, and Iphis' desolate return home.
3. The divine space represented by Athena. Her appearance on high, as we shall see, merges the distanced space of the gods with the reflexive space of Athens.

Euripides' refusal to employ the extrascenic space of the temple, or to call attention to the building as such after the opening scene, gradually diminishes its importance. In the process, the play moves away from its Eleusinian setting and the promise of the Mysteries, reflecting the hope of renewal in the Demeter-Persephone myth. In its place, the political space of Athens increasingly dominates the action, culminating in the arrival of Athena, warrior goddess of the city, on the machine.

The staging of the first part of *Suppliant Women* gives us clear signs of this spatial trajectory. In a canceled entry Aethra stands at Demeter's altar, surrounded by the women of the Chorus who plead for help in recovering the corpses of their unburied sons. The temple background, orchestra altar, and verbal description establish that we are at Eleusis, where Aethra has come to celebrate the Proerosia, an Athenian ritual for the fall plowing. The women "bind" Aethra with suppliant wands, where she remains "imprisoned" (31–32) at the altar until "freed" (364), at which point the play cuts loose from Eleusis.

Arrayed silently in the background are the women's grandsons (the sons of the dead) and the defeated Argive leader Adrastus. The gendered spatial arrangement—women in a ritual deadlock near the center, men at the back—is maintained through most of the opening sequence. With Theseus' arrival from Athens, however, civic demands replace ritual concerns, and female *thrēnoi* give way to political *logoi*. Eventually this dynamic alters the stage picture, dividing the Argive contingent (Adrastus, sons, the suppliant women) near the facade from the Athenian mother and son at the orchestra altar.¹³¹

Adrastus appeals to Theseus as the leader of a strong and merciful city, unlike Sparta (187), encouraging the audience to glimpse—behind the myth—the contemporary cities of Athens, Thebes, Argos, and Sparta destructively entangled in the Peloponnesian War.¹³² When Theseus rejects the Argives' plea for help, Aethra enters the fray, challenging her son to uphold Panhellenic norms by leading Athens against Thebes (297–331). She delivers the first of the play's overtly political speeches; the now persuaded Theseus follows with a description of democratic self-government and the workings of the Athenian assembly (349–56), where he will present the Argive case.¹³³ The poignancy of mourning and the simple eloquence of supplication yield to political discourse with a strong fifth-century accent.

The sense that Athens has become the place of the play increases markedly with the release of Aethra from her suppliant bondage.¹³⁴ After she departs for Athens with Theseus, Adrastus, and the secondary chorus of the sons, we hear next to nothing of the Eleusinian setting.¹³⁵ The Chorus performs one of the shortest odes in tragedy (only sixteen lines), during which time Theseus meets with the Athenian assembly, persuades the city to vote for recovering the dead bodies, and returns with Adrastus to Eleusis. Flexible treatment of space and time characterizes tragedy, as the near speed-of-light arrival of the Greeks from Troy in *Agamemnon* demonstrates. But in *Suppliant Women* Euripides so compacts space and time that the distance separating Athens from Eleusis collapses, and the contemporary world increasingly impinges on the heroic and mythic.¹³⁶

The encounter between Theseus and the Theban Herald accelerates this transformation. In a detail often overlooked, Theseus first instructs his own herald on the message he must take *to Thebes* (381–94). The unexpected arrival of Creon's Herald preempts the Athenian's departure, as if the important distanced spaces now converge on Athens. A rancorous debate ensues on the relative merits of tyranny and democracy, marked by fifth-century vocabulary and references to contemporary life. The Theban compares his advantageous position to one who moves first in *pessos* (409–10), a popular board game with strong political overtones.¹³⁷ The Herald's attack on democratic excess resonates with other fifth-century sources, and his particular charge that Athens “meddles” in other states' affairs (*prassein su poll'*, 576–

77) echoes the oft-repeated accusation against Periclean *polupragmosunē*.¹³⁸ Theseus praises the annual rotation of officers, a distinguishing feature of Athenian democracy (406–7); he emphasizes political equality, denied in tyranny (429–32) but guaranteed in Athens (440–41); he even quotes the phrase that opened each meeting of the Athenian assembly (438–39). The space of the play becomes increasingly reflexive, as the Eleusinian setting and its mythical associations fade. We see two men engaged in a constitutional debate, an exchange not unlike that between the Corinthians and the Athenians in Thucydides (1.68–78).¹³⁹ More and more the theater resembles an Athenian public forum.

Bringing news of the Athenian victory, the Messenger at first glance introduces a world geographically and temporally distant from fifth-century Athens. He evokes Thebes of the heroic age, with its formidable seven gates; the Boeotian plain where an epiclike battle is met; and a warrior Theseus, who provides the mythic foundation for Athens' superiority, both moral and military (650–723).¹⁴⁰ However, specific details wrest the action from a distanced space and heroic past, moving it toward the theatrical here-and-now. An escaped Argive prisoner of war, the Messenger watches the battle from a Theban tower, "spectator" (*theatēs*, 652) rather than participant. His relationship to the action resembles that of the audience to his own account; he even responds to the battle like a thrilled theatergoer, shouting, applauding (*ka-krousa cheiras*), and dancing his approval of the Athenian victory (719–20).¹⁴¹ In a similar metatheatrical vein, Theseus recovers the corpses of rank-and-file Argives who died at Thebes and he buries them at Eleutherae, on the Attic side of Mount Cithairon (756–59), a village associated with Dionysus Eleuthereus, the patron god of the City Dionysia.¹⁴²

In its spatial play, however, the Messenger's speech scatters more than a light dust of theatrical self-reference. Praising Theseus' restraint in not sacking Thebes (721–25), the Messenger proclaims "That's the kind of man to elect as general [*haireisthai stratēgon*]" (726), alluding to the ten annually elected *stratēgoi* who ran the Athenian military, discussed in chapter 1. Pericles' reelection to that office allowed him to wield power as *primus inter pares* till his death in 429. Thereafter the office went increasingly to demagogues like Cleon, charged with prolonging the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides, by several characters in Aristophanes' comedies, and obliquely by Theseus himself earlier in *Suppliant Women* (232–37).¹⁴³ The Messenger distrusts leaders who lack Theseus' self-control, climbing too high only to bring themselves and their cities crashing down (728–30). Again, Euripides uses the theater to dramatize contemporary public concerns while presenting a narrative from the "mythic past."

On his return with the bodies of the Seven, Theseus invites Adrastus to deliver a funeral oration over the corpses for the instruction of "these young men of the city" (843), referring to the young Athenians in the theater audi-

ence.¹⁴⁴ In a passage that troubles some critics, Theseus warns Adrastus not to give a blow-by-blow account of how the heroes met their deaths (846–56), a pointed barb at Aeschylean technique where battle reports unfold with a clarity that mocks the chaos of war.¹⁴⁵ As in the Messenger speech, theatrical self-reference gives way to the evocation of Athenian reflexive space, drawing on the great *epitaphioi logoi* delivered at the Kerameikos, part of the annual Genesia festival that provided public burial for Athenians who fell in battle.¹⁴⁶

In his funeral address, Adrastus drastically rewrites history, converting arrogant soldiers-of-fortune into models of civic propriety. He unwittingly underlines the dangers inherent in such public occasions, tailor-made for social and political indoctrination.¹⁴⁷ Sobriety aside, Adrastus anticipates Chekhov's classic story "The Orator," in which the title character produces grand graveside rhetoric over the *wrong corpse*. By modeling Adrastus' funeral speech on the public discourse of contemporary Athens, Euripides transforms the theater of Dionysus into a space where the original audience members gained critical perspective on their city and its ideological formation.

With the unexpected appearance of Evadne on a crag above the sanctuary,¹⁴⁸ the original setting of Eleusis reasserts itself. Unmentioned before or after her scene, the widow of Capaneus throws herself on his funeral pyre and so arrives at "the marriage chamber of Persephone" (1022). But Evadne reenacts the Eleusinian story as if in a parabolic mirror. In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone leaves her husband Hades, ascends into the light, and joyfully reunites with her mother Demeter. Evadne does the reverse, leaping down into the fire to merge erotically and indissolubly with her dead husband, leaving her father Iphis desolate. In spatial terms, Evadne is either too high above or too far below her father for him to make contact. "Your hand cannot reach me!" she cries out before leaping (1069), creating the negative image of Theseus clasping his mother's hand when they leave Eleusis (361). Their departure for Athens sustains the Eleusinian promise of parent-child reunion; the eternal separation of Iphis and Evadne shatters it.¹⁴⁹

Evadne's appearance returns the play to Eleusis, but her suicide denies the sanctuary its gift of hope beyond the grave. Cut off forever from his daughter, Iphis wishes for a second life without offspring, whose early deaths cut too deeply for a parent to bear (1080–112).¹⁵⁰ Iphis' wish never to have fathered children echoes the Chorus's desire to have lived unmarried and childless (786–93), a wish the women repeat when they see the bodies of their dead sons: "If only my body had never been yoked / to a husband's bed" (822–23). Similar statements occur at moments of fear and loss in other tragedies, but the Eleusinian setting gives the sentiment particular bite. Mirroring Demeter's journey to Eleusis in search of her lost daughter, Iphis knows nothing of the myth's restorative conclusion, or of the promise it offers those initiated in its Mysteries.

This extraordinary scene highlights the anomaly of the play's initial Eleusian setting. We recognize the locational disjunction earlier, when Theseus speaks of the inappropriateness of foreign women—dressed in mourning, their hair shorn—surrounding his mother at Demeter's altar (92–97). “What's going on?” (*ti chrēma*; 92) he asks, for corpses do not belong at a Greek sanctuary, particularly one that celebrates a successful *anodos* ‘way up’ or *anabasis* ‘upward journey’ from the underworld. Adrastus explains that the women have “not come on a mission to the Mysteries of Demeter, but in order to bury the dead” (173–74), and the phrase “bury the dead” rings like a refrain until the stage is laden with corpses.¹⁵¹ In the first funereal sequence (794–954, the longest in tragedy), we watch the procession into the theater of the recovered bodies, a *kommos* between the Chorus and Adrastus, the funeral oration discussed earlier, and the procession of the corpses back out the *eisodoi* for cremation offstage. In contrast to the Demeter-Persephone *anabasis*, the women of the Chorus wish to “perish with these children / making the journey down [*katabasa*] with them to Hades” (796–97).

The second funeral sequence follows hard on the Evadne-Iphis scene, where suicide introjects the immediacy of dying into a space overwhelmed by the already dead. Iphis exits out one *eisodos* into self-imposed oblivion, saying that the old should die and make way for the young (1112–13). As if on cue, the sons of the Seven (with Adrastus) enter through the other *eisodos*, bearing the ashes of their fathers. Once they join the Chorus of women, the stage holds the span of Argive generations, a visual image of the hard-won achievement of the suppliants' petition that opened the play. And yet a rift grows between the grieving mothers of the dead and their grandsons, consumed with the desire for heroic revenge (1143–52). As the generation and gender gaps widen, the space of *Suppliant Women* again opens up reflexively, incorporating aspects of the festival of Dionysus that preceded the tragic performances, discussed in chapter 1.

At the age of eighteen, orphaned sons of Athenian soldiers who fell in battle marched through the orchestra dressed in hoplite armor provided by the city. Raised and armed at civic expense, the young men promised to defend Athens in the future. In the drama, Argive orphans (emphasized at 1132–34) process through the orchestra holding the cremated remains of their fathers, men who had received a funeral oration (857–917) like the fathers of the Athenian orphans at the public ceremony in the Kerameikos. The Argive youths long to bear a shield and avenge their war-slain fathers (1144, 1146–47, 1150–51), just as their Athenian counterparts bore the city's armor (including the hoplite shield) in honor of their dead forebears. From on high, Athena exhorts the Argive orphans to lead a “bronze-clad” army against Thebes when their “beards begin to shadow” (1219–20), again recalling the Athenian boys who take up arms when they come of age. “Persephone's hallowed floor” (271), from which the mothers made their opening

supplication, now serves as a proto-staging area for another invasion of Thebes, the same (orchestral) ground where the audience at the preperformance ritual had witnessed homegrown orphans encouraged to fight on behalf of the city. In both the scenic space of the play and the real space of the theater, the seeds of future war are sown.

Perhaps more than any extant tragedy, *Suppliant Women* conjoins mythical Athens with its living counterpart. That Greek theater offered a space to dramatize contemporary issues does not reflect a lack of concern for the plot, dialogue, and character of the heroic story-at-hand. On the contrary, it demonstrates that tragic myths possessed sufficient gravity to hold the contemporary world within their orbit, creating a wide spatial field in which mythic and contemporary worlds could coexist. In a play like *Suppliant Women*, that field includes nothing more important than the Peloponnesian War. Creon's tyrannical refusal to return the Argive corpses leads to the women's supplication and Theseus' battle on their behalf; it also reflects the historical refusal of the Thebans to relinquish Athenian dead after the campaign at Delium in November 424.¹⁵² *Suppliant Women* premiered some five months later in 423, only a few days before the Athenian assembly voted on a year-long armistice with Sparta, part of the increasing effort to end the Peloponnesian War.¹⁵³ It seems likely that the delegates from the Peloponnesus arrived for discussions with the Athenian *boulē* just before the City Dionysia began and actually were in attendance at the first performance of *Suppliant Women*, along with many of the citizens of Athens who would vote on the agreement. In such an environment, the image of the orphan-to-hoplite ceremony at the end of the play would loom large, moving from theatrical fiction into Athens' immediate future.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, when Athena insists that Theseus formalize a defensive alliance between her city and Argos (1183–1212), she echoes the on-again, off-again negotiations that eventually led to the Argive-Athenian alliance of 420, forged after the short-lived Peace of Nikias ended the first stage of the Peloponnesian War in 421.¹⁵⁵

A deep-rooted concern for peace may explain Euripides' use of the myth of the Argive Seven to explore arguments for a just war; the advantages of restraint in combat; the preference for resolving disputes without force; and, above all, the need to resist the compulsions to vengeance and violence.¹⁵⁶ The play establishes beyond doubt that the original Seven surrendered to these destructive impulses, with tragic results for the survivors, as the title suggests.¹⁵⁷ Not only was the conflict avoidable, as Adrastus himself admits (737–41), but the gods themselves condemned it (155–61, 214–18, 229–31). In taking up the Argive cause, Theseus explicitly distances the recovery of the corpses for burial from the Seven's original attack on Thebes (246–49, 522–41 after pointedly silencing Adrastus at 513, 558–63, 590–93, 720–25). The *hubris* of that invasion left its mark on Greek iconography, in the depiction of Capaneus struck down by Zeus' lightning bolt as he mounts a

siege ladder on the walls of Thebes.¹⁵⁸ The image occurs several times in the play (496–505, 639–40, 727–30 [by implication], 860, 934–35, 980–85, 1009–11), and we catch its reflection in the leap of Capaneus' widow into his funeral pyre.¹⁵⁹

If Euripides goes to such lengths to establish the injustice of the Seven's campaign against Thebes, why does Athena encourage their sons to mount another invasion to exact vengeance? Considering important spatial patterns in the tragedy helps provide an answer. The unexpected arrival of Athena on high completes the scenic shift from Eleusis to Athens, and from the mythic world to the contemporary *polis*, discussed earlier. Athena counters the image of Demeter at the outset, symbolically present in the figure of Aethra, standing orchestra center at the goddess's altar, performing rites in her honor.¹⁶⁰ So, too, Athena stands in place of Evadne, the female character who brings the play suddenly back to Eleusis. Appearing in the same position as Evadne, Athena proves no less shocking.¹⁶¹ The goddess unleashes a cycle of violence whose impact the audience has, in a sense, already seen in Evadne's suicide from the same spot. When the immortal Athena urges young men to battle (1213–26), the audience sees—standing below Athena and behind the boys—the suppliant mothers still dressed for mourning, whose presence throughout evokes the pain unleashed by war. The split focus—immortal on high, mortals below—simultaneously acknowledges and denies the lessons about violent excess that the play has exposed. We hear them voiced by Adrastus and Theseus, reflected in the moderation of Theseus in battle, embodied in the fate of Capaneus, and forgotten at the end.

Although linked by gender and the fact that the same actor played all three roles (a convention explored further in chapter 4), the characters of Aethra, Evadne, and Athena behave in very different ways, providing a useful perspective on the spaces of Greek religious cult referred to in *Suppliant Women*. Athena appears on high, a confident Olympian talking down to her subjects, a goddess who requires lavish public worship at civicwide festivals like the Panathenaia. She stands as the chauvinist champion of her city, Promachos (“fighting in the forefront”), a virgin warrior whose colossal bronze statue dominated the Athenian Acropolis, rising so high that sailors rounding Cape Sounion (some forty miles distant) could see the point of her spear and crest of her helmet catching the sun.¹⁶² Evadne signals the other side of Greek religious life, a chthonic cult linked to the heroic dead. She leaps down to the earth to join Capaneus, who—buried apart, at Theseus' behest (934–36, 1009–11)—is destined for worship.¹⁶³ Such hero cults required sacrificial blood to flow into the ground, frequently without feasting among the participants, unlike Olympian ritual where the smoke of burnt sacrifice rose to the heavens and a shared meal followed.¹⁶⁴

Moving between Olympian sky and a hero's earth is the goddess Demeter, whose altar at Eleusis plays a prominent role early in the play. In the *Hymn to*

Demeter, she appears at Eleusis both in divine and human form, challenging Zeus and the male gods who allowed Hades to abduct her daughter. Using her power over the earth to withhold its vegetation, Demeter frees Persephone from the underworld and reverses (for two-thirds of the year) the virilocal pattern of her marriage to Hades. An “eccentric goddess,” Demeter stands somewhat outside the pantheon, a divinity closely linked to women. Her most widely attested festival, the Thesmophoria, allowed only female participants.¹⁶⁵ At Eleusis, her mystery cult was neither parochial nor chauvinistic, but Panhellenic in nature, like the norms that Aethra insists should guide her city’s actions vis-à-vis the dead (306–13).¹⁶⁶ Open to all Greek speakers who sought initiation, the Mysteries offered mortals a communal experience of light and hope, bridging the gap between death and immortality.

Two images associated with Demeter—new growth from the earth, and life-giving harvest—reflect the agricultural cycle basic to human survival, and central to Greek conceptions of the space of the cosmos (examined in the appendix).¹⁶⁷ To celebrate the Proerosia, a sacrifice before the fall plowing and sowing, Aethra comes to Demeter’s shrine “where the bristling ears of corn appeared for the first time above this earth” (28–36).¹⁶⁸ Theseus alludes later to the natural cycle of growth and harvest (205–7), echoing the traditional sentiment (*Od.* 19.109–14) that a land governed with justice brings forth abundant crops. However, the arrival and supplication of the mothers of the dead interrupt Aethra’s generative ritual. They bind her to the altar with a “chainless chain of leaves” (28–36), insisting that the ritual demand to return “corpses to the earth, and spirit to the air” (534) take precedence.¹⁶⁹ As Theseus comes to understand, “that which nourished life [the earth] must take it back” (536).¹⁷⁰

In the process, we hear of various ways that humans bring forth and cut down, replacing the natural regenerative cycle with ongoing destruction. Theseus ridicules the Theban refusal to bury the dead out of fear that “those covered in the earth / will somehow dig up your land; or that the earth’s dark womb / will bear children, and with them vengeance” (544–46). The Thebans themselves are *spartoi* ‘sown ones’ (578, 712), whose mythical emergence from the soil (and resulting bloodbath) the Herald invokes before the battle with Athens (578–80).¹⁷¹ Paranoid tyrants kill their city’s best and brightest, like “one who cuts down the ears of spring wheat” (448–49), an image echoed in Herodotus’ account of the despotic behavior of the Milesian tyrant Thrasybulus and his Corinthian counterpart Periander.¹⁷² In his battle against the tyrant Creon, Theseus swings his mace like a scythe at harvest time, “snapping necks like stalks and cropping the helmets on their heads like ears of summer corn” (716–17).¹⁷³ After the sacrifice that seals the pact between Argos and Athens, Athena instructs Theseus “to bury the sharp-cutting knife in the earth’s womb,” where it will emerge to frighten Argives

who forget the oath and march on Athens (1205–9).¹⁷⁴ The spatially concrete replaces the ambiguities of language and memory, for it is the knife in the ground that guarantees the treaty.

The buried knife suggests that the play of space in *Suppliant Women* includes some appropriate “placements”: the Chorus releases Aethra from her suppliant prison; the earth receives the corpses, the air the souls of the Argive heros, as Theseus promises (524–36); the victorious Athenians do not violate the inner sanctum of Thebes but only take back the dead;¹⁷⁵ the Argive suppliants, displaced at the start, return to Argos with the remains of their loved ones. Yet the childish fears of the Thebans lambasted by Theseus seem justified in the end: out of the recovered dead grows vengeance, until the sons threaten a future invasion and the destruction of Thebes.

Many scholars think that Euripides faces up to the intrinsic violence in human nature, acknowledging that forces within cannot be gainsaid and will emerge no matter what. To give the argument its spatial form, they see Euripides as a tragic realist who locates irrepressible instincts to violence in the natural space of the womb (both earthly and motherly), which are passed on in birth.¹⁷⁶ Others note the ultimate failure of *logos* in the face of *pathos*, pitting the rationality espoused by Theseus against the emotional suffering of the suppliant women.¹⁷⁷ Missing from both these accounts is the play’s insistence on the role of education in developing or deterring propensities to violence. We hear time and again of the duty of the elders to try to redirect hot-blooded or wrongheaded youth away from their destructive tendencies. In their different ways, Adrastus (with the Seven, 160–161, 231–37, 250–51), Iphis (with Evadne, 1038–69), and the women of the Chorus (with their grandsons, 1143–58) fail to do this. Aethra succeeds by changing Theseus’ mind (297–341), and he firmly and wisely limits the violence he must employ, as the Messenger reports.

But the success or failure of *paideia* against destructive instincts ultimately must be measured across a society. Theseus invites Adrastus to speak for the benefit of young Athenians (843), and in his speech history is forgotten, replaced by untruths that perpetuate the cycle of violence. Adrastus closes his funeral oration by affirming the importance of such an education: “This bravery [of the Seven] can be taught [*didakton*], for even a baby is taught [*didasketai*] to hear and say things he doesn’t yet understand [*mathēsin*]. Whoever learns [*an mathēi*] something that way is likely to hold onto it until old age” (913–17). We find few clearer statements in tragedy of what we would call ideological brainwashing. In his lavish praise of the Seven, Adrastus emphasizes the way they learned their values from a young age: the young (*neanias*, 873) Eteoclus; Hippomedon, who learned to prefer a martial life from childhood (*pais ὄν*, 882); the foreign-born Parthenopaeus, raised as a youth (*pais*, 889) and educated (*paideuetai*, 891) in Argos; and Tydeus, who received excellent training in weapons (*heurōn akribē mousikēn en aspidi* 906).

It is not, as Burian claims, that “Theseus’ ordered world of the intellect will yield to the mother’s world of emotions, bringing into question the assumptions on which it is founded.”¹⁷⁸ The women do not demand a new war on Thebes, only the return of their sons’ bodies. The trouble arises not from emotional mothers but from their grandsons, educated toward violence by a *logos* that Theseus himself seems to have resisted.

Returning to the space of *Suppliant Women*, we now can view it as an educational arena that reflects other paideutic spaces in Athens: the assembly, lawcourts, the agora, various ritual situations, schools, state funerals, preperformance festivities, even tragic performances themselves.¹⁷⁹ Adopting Lewin’s formulation, these are all “spaces that matter,” that build the ideological roads that connect the city within itself and out to the larger world. By serving as a heterotopia in Foucault’s sense, the theater stands sufficiently outside those ideological forces to offer a critical perspective on them. Athena, however, offers no such perspective, demanding that her “patronized” Theseus stand by while the seeds take root of another unjust war. In the figure of Athena, the locus of “Athenian state religion,” we see a twisted image of Theseus’ mother Aethra, who rose off her knees from the orchestra floor and bravely entered the world of political discourse, shaming her son into undertaking a just war.¹⁸⁰ Speaking down from above, Athena teaches precisely the opposite, and the *young* Theseus (emphasized at 190, 283, 580) must learn the lesson. Despite his best efforts, he finds himself trapped in a web of history and myth.¹⁸¹ The cycle of violence continues, in no small part because it receives official sanction.

The fact that Athena shifts the destination at the end of the play *to Athens* underlines this bleak conclusion. Before Athena’s appearance, Adrastus bids farewell to Theseus, and he and his contingent (the suppliant women, and the sons with the funeral urns) prepare to depart for Argos (1165–82). After the goddess’s intervention, however, the entire party exits through the *eisodos* to swear the oath “before this man and his city” (*tōid’ andri polei t’*, 1232–34), moving out of the fictional world and into the reality of Athens, where the tragedy was performed. Earlier, the play brought the city’s various spaces temporarily into view, nested in the orchestra; at the end, that relationship is reversed. The theater again becomes a place nested in the wider space of the fifth-century *polis*. When the members of the audience, too, make their exit, they reinhabit their city as they choose, influenced by what the spatial transformations of *Suppliant Women* have revealed.