PROVOCATION

Athens: A Work-in-Progress

Stephe Harrop
Liverpool Hope University
harrops@hope.ac.uk

Abstract

This provocation contests the familiar construction of classical Athens as an ideal exemplar of democratic politics through a focus on the city's material fabric, its visual artworks, and the performances which took place within its public spaces. It highlights the city's ongoing process of material re-building (particularly following the Persian invasion of 480 BCE), during which process many of its old artworks were appropriated or re-purposed to express democratic aspirations and anxieties. It also foregrounds the ongoing tensions given articulation through the city's new showpiece building projects and performance events, including theatrical tragedy and comedy. The aim, throughout, is to challenge clichéd (and idealising) views of classical Athens as a unified and serene white-marble vista. Instead, this provocation cultivates an alternative vision of the democratic city as unfinished, insecure, and frequently disunited: a permanent "work-in-progress" in both a material and a political sense. In conclusion, the Athens of the fifth century BCE is re-positioned as a timely (though not a "timeless") reminder to today's politically-engaged artists, educators, and activists that democratic self-definition and practice can only be sustained through a vigorous, ongoing, and open-ended process of debate, confrontation, and contestation within the civic and creative spaces of the city.

Keywords

fifth-century Athens, democracy, Greek tragedy, Greek comedy, Parthenon, classical sculpture

About the Author

Stephe Harrop is Lecturer in Drama (Shakespeare and the Classics) at Liverpool Hope University. She co-edited *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice* (2010); her recent publications include "*Grounded,* Heracles and the Gorgon's Gaze" (*Arion,* 2015), and a forthcoming chapter, "Unfixing Epic: Homeric Orality and Contemporary Performance," is due for publication in the Oxford University Press volume *Epic Performances*

from the Middle Ages into the Twenty-First Century in 2018. Stephe is also an Early Career Associate of The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at the University of Oxford.

The Athens of the fifth century BCE was not the landscape many of us imagine today. Occupied and burned by invading Persian forces (480 BCE), the mid-century city was more a construction-site than a classical, white-marble vista, with houses of unbaked brick and makeshift workshops huddling below the blackened ruins of archaic temples, whose scarred remains were re-purposed to prop up rising new-builds. Nor was this a city of classical hush. Disputatious voices rose from the rock outcrop of the Pnyx (where citizens assembled to debate and vote) and the *agora* (marketplace, meeting-space, not to mention hub of gossip and legal wrangling). To this day, these voices matter. Co-mingled with a near-permanent racket of earth-moving and stone-cutting, their echo serves to remind later centuries and societies that while the city rebuilt itself, its citizens were simultaneously engaged in a radical and high-stakes project of political and cultural self-fashioning. They were, in fact, working out how to self-define, and how to survive, as a democracy.

In *Classical Archaeology of Greece,* Michael Shanks observes that accounts of this period frequently present a familiar "façade," obscuring the fact that "the real past is a partial construction, in all senses of the phrase" (2). In relation to Shanks' observation, the present provocation contests the familiar "construction" of fifth-century Athens as an unproblematic exemplar of democratic politics, through a focus on the city's material fabric, its visual artworks, and the theatrical performances which took place within its public spaces. This particular angle derives from the context for which this text was initially created: a symposium presented as part of the 2016 Liverpool Biennial which reflected on the relationship between classical Athens (both celebrated and subverted in the "Ancient Greece" episode hosted by TATE Liverpool) and the challenges facing modern urban democracy. However, as Lorna Hardwick notes, for many non-specialists the "entry point" to engagement with the ancient world is "visual and spatial experience" rather than the reading of ancient texts (28). This insight supports Salvatore Settis' claim that current popular enthusiasm for exploring the classical past manifests itself in inverse proportion to the number of students encountering the ancient world through formal education (13). It is therefore pertinent to consider how re-conceptualizations of the material life of the ancient city might inform contemporary understandings of its politics, and its relationship with present-day political and creative practices. The discussion which follows sets about re-mapping some of the most famous architectural and artistic landmarks of ancient Athens, highlighting the city's ongoing process of material re-building, and the corresponding way in which its public spaces facilitated a set of cultural practices rooted in ongoing, open-ended debate and public contestation. In so doing, it attempts to articulate a new vision of the democratic city as a challenging (and perhaps still unachieved) "work-in-progress."

It is worth noting at the outset that Athenian democracy was never a singular, settled phenomenon, taking a range of forms across its contentious and uneasy lifespan. But throughout the fifth-century BCE, what the city-state of Athens meant by democracy differs significantly from current uses of the term (Cartledge 306). The ancient city's democratic regimes, for instance, were almost universally predicated on direct democracy (as opposed to the representative systems operative in most contemporary societies) and rooted in active citizen participation. There were major (and to some modern perspectives, even shocking) limitations to this large-scale political enfranchisement. Citizen democrats had to be free men and (during some periods) the legally-recognised sons of two Athenian parents. Slaves, ex-slaves, women, and foreign-born residents (including the inhabitants of other Greek city-states) were rigorously excluded. Even free male youths only had partial access to democratic participation, since full civic rights and responsibilities were only acquired at the age of thirty, and following mandatory military service. As Page duBois rightly emphasises, this was a city dominated by an exclusive body of male citizens who "kept slaves, subjugated women, hated and frequently brutalized [their] enemies" (19). However, to those who did qualify for participation, the Athenian system offered unprecedented access to high-level decision-making. Every citizen male of adult age was entitled to vote in person on all aspects of domestic and foreign policy, as well as being liable for election (sometimes decided by lottery) to a range of political or judicial committees and offices. Throughout the fifth century BCE, this new citizen body was involved in a groundbreaking struggle for democratic self-definition and self-education—more significantly, this process was never confined to the city's official political spaces.

In the Theatre of Dionysus, tragic plays regularly trumpeted the triumph of Athens. At the close of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BCE), the city's patron goddess declares Athens "the home of justice" (685) and spectators are promised: "No civil war / Will snarl its anger. In the city, […] The thirsty dust / Will not gulp down / The dark blood of the people" (875-981). But Athenian playwrights were not simply concerned with giving the city good propaganda material. Tragic plays also probed some of the most intractable problems of democratic governance. How do we justify going to war? How do we survive both the rage of, and acts of revenge committed by, those people our wars have damaged beyond repair? Does our duty to give shelter to refugees outweigh political self-interest? Does the incorporation of strangers pose a mortal threat to a community's integrity and security? The protagonists of such tragic dramas argued, passionately, for incompatible points of view. Their virtuosic set speeches, matched in length, mirrored the rhetorical conventions of the city's lawcourts (Hall 2006, 354-5), and these *agons* lie at the heart of tragedy's dramatic confrontations. The term, which means a struggle, debate, or conflict, originated in sporting contexts and was used to describe wrestling matches before being co-opted into the city's theatrical vocabulary (Wallace 10-11). A comparable sense of

embodied struggle perhaps also shaped the physical scores of tragic performance, which David Wiles (in *Tragedy in Athens*) conceptualises as "democratic spatial practice" (78). While pondering the genre's demanding questions, tragic choruses danced, turning first in one direction, and then retracing their steps in reverse (*strophe* and *antistrophe*). Sometimes they found a satisfactory answer to their dilemma, sometimes not. (The chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon,* the first play in the *Oresteia* trilogy, ends up powerless and fragmented, having failed to shield their king from murder.) Again and again, the city's dramas represent embattled socio-political communities: ordinary people up against seemingly unsolvable problems, thinking together in public.

Athens' fifth-century comedies, too, were packed with conflict, often played out through scurrilous verbal contest (including much deliberate slander of celebrated or infamous fellow-citizens), and extravagantly violent slapstick. The poor, discontented farmers of Aristophanes' plays boisterously insist on their own physical reality, longing for the bodily satisfactions of ample food, plentiful wine, music and dance, plus as much sexual enjoyment as is feasible, while railing at political and cultural leaders who prize political or philosophical abstractions over such self-evident, embodied pleasures. The appetite-driven bodies of comedy were visually enhanced in performance through deliberately ugly masks and grotesquely padded costumes: ageing, sagging bellies, and oversized sexual organs were particularly common features. Whether locked in furious mock-battle over internal governance or international policy or squabbling over the gratification of more basic human desires, the exuberant theatrical spectacle of such comic bodies offered an unapologetic contrast to the physical ideals embodied in serenely beautiful sculptures being hoisted atop the new civic buildings of the Acropolis.

Plays were performed in the open air, in bright daylight, at the center of a theater carved out of a natural hollow. This meant that citizen spectators could easily look across the concave space to see their friends, neighbours, and rivals. Of necessity, many of the free men of Athens were learning to manage their new rights and responsibilities on-the-job, "in the day-to-day practice of political life" (Beard), and some scholars have argued that collective theatergoing provided Athens' new democrats (often with access to limited formal education) with a basic training in how to be "active participants in self-government by mass meeting and open debate" (Cartledge 19). It is appropriate, then, that the spectacle of the gathered community, grappling, intellectually and emotionally, with complex disputes and issues, was always included within "the spatial field of the performance" (Wiles 212). At the theater (the Greek word *theatron* literally denoted a "seeing place") the city did not just watch plays—it also watched itself think, its massed citizens visibly grappling with the most perplexing of their shared problems. In these terms, the Athenian theater of the fifth century BCE was capable of functioning as a profoundly

'agonistic' space; a vital public forum for imaginatively exploring challenges to, and unresolved contradictions within, the democratic city.

Beyond the theater, the public artworks which adorned the city's half-finished public spaces testified to the potentially tense cultural and aesthetic negotiations involved in fifth-century Athens' process of democratic self-definition. In the *agora* stood a pair of bronze statues representing the city's regicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, though the statues were in fact hastily knocked-up copies of originals looted by the Persians, and the celebrated pair were, in any case, scarcely ideal democratic exemplars, having murdered their victim (Hipparches) when he threatened to break up their typically aristocratic sexual partnership (Aristotle 18.1-4). At crossroads and boundaries stood a series of archaic "herms", representations of the god Hermes, symbols of fertility and good fortune, but most striking to modern eyes for their prominent, upright phalluses. When, in 415 BCE, the herms were mutilated overnight, citizens were superstitiously convinced that the impious act heralded military disaster, perhaps even the downfall of the city-state (Thucydides, 6.27-9), and a general—suspected by some of wishing to overturn democracy and make himself king—was indicted for crimes including their vandalism (6.53; 6.61). Even the city's now-famous ceramics could be re-purposed by the *polis*. Smashed into shards, the resulting fragments of pots (*ostraka*) were scratched or scribbled with the names of prominent men whose personal ambitions were considered to pose a danger to the political community. The figure who received the majority of votes cast was exiled from the city for a period of ten years, via the democratic ritual of "ostracism" (Beard; Cartledge 2016, 70-2). In all these ways, old art objects could become the focus for new political aspirations and anxieties.

Meanwhile, high-profile creative commissions reminded citizens of the other dangers a democracy must overcome to survive. On the friezes of the brand-new Parthenon (the great temple to Athene sponsored by Pericles, and overseen by Phidias, 447-437 BCE) Greek heroes, painted in bright pigments, perpetually battled drunk, rowdy centaurs, and struggled against warlike Amazons. The Parthenon's decorations celebrated mythic victories, while simultaneously etching the notion of "recurring conflict between Hellenic civilization and barbarism" into its viewers' consciousness (duBois, 126). The monument's combative imagery served as a vivid reminder of those dangerous, inferior groups (foreigners, barbarians, and women) who represented an ever-present threat to the city's democratic institutions, perhaps to its very survival. Such artworks tapped into deep-seated cultural anxieties – as they still do today. Classical sculpture in particular has become a focus of current controversy, with far-right political groups in Europe and the USA actively deploying images of Greek statuary to promote narratives of white supremacy (Hanink, 244-6; McCoskey). When classicist Sarah Bond wrote an article reiterating the widely-held academic view that the pristine, marble whiteness conventionally associated

with Greek statues misrepresents ancient practice, which (as with the Parthenon's friezes) was more likely to have involved coloured paint and gilding, thereby drawing connections between the myth of classical monochrome and present-day racial politics, she received online threats of violence and calls for her dismissal (Flaherty). In times of political uncertainty, the material icons of the ancient past have again become objects of intense contestation between opposed groups vying for possession of what Donna Zuckerberg calls "the cultural capital of antiquity."

And yet, despite such fierce struggles among the academic community and political activists, it is still all too easy for the non-specialist to be seduced by what Salvatore Settis calls "superficial and persistent" images (13) of fifth-century Athens, all white marble and democratic virtue. TATE Liverpool's "Ancient Greece" episode included several pieces collected by antiquarian Henry Blundell (1724-1810) which provide a potentially illuminating parallel. Sighted from a distance, these statues (identified as Athene, Tyche, and Dionysus) appeared to be uncontroversial exemplars of classical religious sculpture. Nearer inspection, however, revealed the works to be uneasy composites of mismatched body-parts re-assembled by eighteenth-century restorers. Close-up, the resulting works exuded an air of unease, potential absurdity (whose feet are these, anyway?) and, in the visible brokenness of their disparate parts, a kind of vulnerability. In the same way, as Settis argues, detailed study of the ancient city reveals uncomfortable instances of ideological contradiction and cultural strangeness; unsettling phenomena all too commonly airbrushed from grand-narratives of the classical past where Athenian democracy, in particular, is constructed as "universal history" (12).

The desire to position a romantically ruined ancient Athens as the "secular Eden" of modern Europe (Shanks 83-5) remains a culturally pervasive trope. It tends to be forgotten that, even before the city re-built its now-iconic civic and cultural spaces, it had started throwing up new defensive walls (in the early 470s BCE) with an urgency that meant tombstones and statues were seized and re-purposed for the building work (Thucydides 1.90-3), while the later "long walls" extending to the city's sea-port (460s-450s BCE) were monuments to imperial ambition and xenophobia (in Greek, the word literally means "fear of the stranger"). The serene Athens of classicising myth, a universal template for later civilisations the world over to aspire to—or congratulate themselves on emulating (Laera, 203-33)—only presents a partial picture of a city which was perennially suspicious of its neighbours and supposed allies, and which was permanently adapting its material fabric to prepare for war. The ancient city was more paranoid, more parochial, and much more precarious than idealising narratives allow.

If the idea of classical Athens still has value today, it is not as an immaculate, unreachable pinnacle of aesthetic excellence and democratic achievement. Too often,

this sanitised myth of a city serves merely to "to legitimize the West's hegemony over the rest of the world" (Settis 12), even as the cliché of its ruins is used to lampoon the ongoing struggles of modern Greece (Hanink 224-6). Such a view overlooks the building sites, the racket of re-construction, the cultural contradictions, the angst, uncertainty, and conflict which consistently characterised life in the fifth-century city. But, as has been argued here, the historical and archaeological remains of fifth-century Athens may provide the foundation for the construction of an alternative narrative. In this re-focused view, venerable public artworks, appropriated by the new regime, embody unresolved tensions between cultural tradition and political innovation. New showpiece projects betray Athens' profoundest anxieties even as they propagandise its mythic and contemporary achievements. The city's public spaces, including its theaters, operate as sites of impassioned (and often unresolved) argument and counterargument. All of these phenomena testify to Athens' ongoing struggle with the perpetually unresolved question of how to do democracy—and how to survive such a risky, radical experiment. As this brief provocation has proposed, re-conceptualising fifth-century Athens as a permanent "work-in-progress" means that the ancient city may be understood not as an unattainable ideal, but rather as providing the earliest example of how relentlessly hard it is to create any kind of functioning democracy. Such a re-envisioned Athens may serve as a timely—though certainly not a "timeless"—reminder to today's politically-engaged artists, educators, and activists that democratic self-definition and practice can only be sustained through a vigorous, ongoing, and open-ended process of debate, confrontation, and contestation within the civic and creative spaces of the city.

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