

A HISTORY OF GREEK THEATRE IN TWO ACTS



Ancient Greek drama dealt with everything from murder and incest to sex and sausages. Yet, says **Michael Scott**, one theme above all dominated the performance of tragedies and comedies in democratic Athens: politics

This detail from a c410 BC red-figure vase shows an actor holding his mask. Greek tragedies were “intensely engaged with the processes of decision-making upon which the entire concept of Athenian democracy was built,” says Michael Scott

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PROLOGUE

The birth of Greek drama

No one knows for sure exactly how theatre emerged in ancient Greece. We think that sometime during the cultural and intellectual revolution of the sixth century BC, the cult dances performed in honour of the god Dionysus morphed into what we might recognise as a theatrical performance. One person, the first actor, stepped out from the choral group to speak back to them, creating not just choral dance and singing, but dialogue, and with it the very essence of theatre. What we do know is that by the time of the advent of Athenian democracy after 508 BC, drama was firmly part of the Athenian landscape.

ACT ONE

“Tragedy was even more political than its plots alone make it seem”

The performance of tragedy was a crucial part of the performance of Athenian identity. The frustrating thing is that though we know tragedies were being performed from at least 534 BC, we don't have a single tragedy surviving in full until 472 BC, Aeschylus's *Persians*. This play is in itself something of an oddity. It does not focus, as most tragedies do, on mythical stories, rather its focus is very recent history: the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks in the Persian wars. Such a direct treatment of real and recent history was not often repeated in Greek tragedy – indeed, we know a play had been banned earlier in 494 BC for being too close to the historical bone.

The normal meat of tragedy was the many myths that encased the Greek world: stories of

horrific murders, incest and destruction, of difficult decisions and agonising choices.

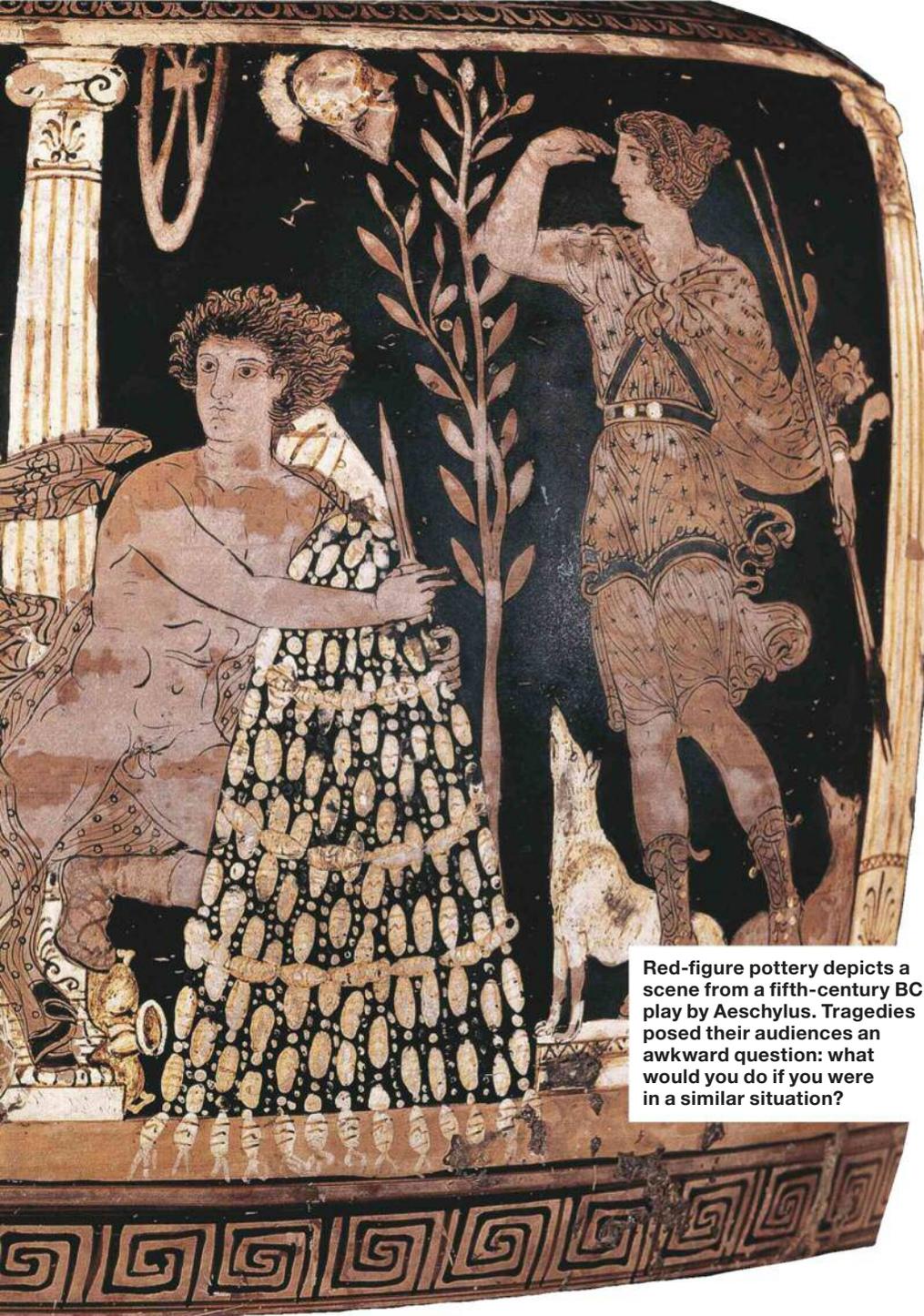
But tragedy did not simply tell sad stories. Key to the form was working through a particular myth, offering up a dilemma to the audience, a dilemma with no easy resolution. It was an art form that demanded the audience's engagement: what would they do if they were faced with a similar situation? And through that process, the audience was taken on a journey of deliberation and decision-making within the 'safe' confines of the theatre and of myth, and they could apply the lessons they learnt to everyday lives.

As a result, it would be wrong to think that tragedy, even though its plots were rarely 'historical', did not relate to real life and history. In truth, it was intensely engaged with the processes of decision-making upon

which the entire concept of Athenian democracy was built.

That link between democratic debate and tragedy in the theatre is made exceptionally clear in Sophocles's *Ajax*. It's a difficult play to date, but what is clear is its direct relevance to the kind of deliberation that was happening on a daily basis in Athens. Ajax is a hero out of time and out of place, unable to accept the decision of the Greek community about who should inherit the armour of Achilles. He goes mad and it's up to the community to decide how to deal with him. Crucially, the play stages a debate among the principal characters, each offering their opinion and trying to win over the others. The play puts centre-stage a debate over how to deal with someone who won't play by the rules. It's a case study of democracy in action.





Red-figure pottery depicts a scene from a fifth-century BC play by Aeschylus. Tragedies posed their audiences an awkward question: what would you do if you were in a similar situation?



Trojan Women depicts the brutal aftermath of conflict

CLASSIC TRAGEDY

Trojan Women

Euripides' harrowing play confronts Athenians with the heartache of war

Written in 415 BC, *Trojan Women* addresses what happened to the people of Troy after their city has fallen to the Greeks. The play focuses on the heartache of the city's women, particularly that of Andromache, who has to suffer not only losing her husband (Hector) and herself being taken as a slave, but her son being killed to prevent him growing up as a threat to the Greeks. To an Athenian audience mired in the Peloponnesian War, this play must have offered an uncomfortable reflection. Both Sparta and Athens had forced similar fates on cities and states during the conflict. The tragedy speaks to the inherent suffering of war, with I think as much resonance today as it had 2,500 years ago.

CRAIG SCHWARTZ, BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC

In many ways, tragedy was even more political than its plots alone make it seem. It was staged within the City Dionysia religious festival, so called because it was held in honour of the god Dionysus. But that religious event was also a chance for the community of Athens to come together as a political unit.

Military parades

The citizens performing in the plays acted in the same groupings as when they went to war. A wealthy citizen sponsored each set of plays, probably hoping to win himself some admiration in the process. Before the plays began, the military generals poured offerings to the gods. The tribute collected from the members of the Athenian empire (representatives of whom were also sitting in the

audience) was paraded across the stage. Lists of those who had benefited the city were read, and the city's orphans – those whose parents had died fighting for the city, and whom the city would now look after – were also paraded in military dress.

The context in which the plays were performed was itself intensely political. It portrayed the essence of Athenian identity. No wonder that Athens spent around 10 per cent of its annual GDP on the City Dionysia, and no wonder everything else in Athens shut down while it was happening – even prisoners, it was said, were let out for its duration.

This crucial link between the Athenian democratic system and the political nature of tragedy held strong for the fifth-century golden age of ancient Athens. But during the fourth century BC, as Athens' political and

military might began to fade and the ancient Greek world expanded, theatre became more detached from politics. Its themes became, on the whole, more universal: love and war, rather than the importance of democratic debate. Take *Antigone* by Aeschylus the Younger, for example. Its theme is a well-known myth, but the focus in this play is on the love between Antigone and Haemon, their escape with their baby and eventual survival. This contrasts with Sophocles's fifth-century version, which focused on the argument between Antigone and Creon over what was the just course of action.

Tragedy in this period became a product that could be enjoyed and have relevance anywhere – not just in Athens. And, without doubt, tragedy and Greek theatre bucked the trend of Athens' decline. It spread across the Greek world, with Greek theatres springing up everywhere from Italy to Afghanistan.

Turn the page for Act Two, on comedy...

ACT TWO

“Comedy focused on key individuals and institutions within the city and took them to task”

When considering ancient Greek comedy, people tend to think about Aristophanes. He was a writer of what is known as ‘old comedy’ – the comedy prevalent in Athens in the second half of the fifth century BC. It was fantastical: choruses of birds and of frogs, ridiculously outlandish and rude jokes, not to mention crazy plots involving sausage sellers, dogs and dung beetles. But that fantasy masks a pointed political edge to these plays. In the fifth century, comedy was, just like tragedy, heavily linked to the context in which it was performed: Athens.

Comedy, however, offered a different kind of service to tragedy. Rather than providing its audience with thorny problems to work through, comedy focused on individuals and institutions that were dominant in the city’s political affairs, and took them to task. Think *Mock the Week*, *Spitting Image*, *Have I Got News for You*.

Aristophanes was a master of ridicule, especially skilled at cutting Athens’ political heavies down to size. There was even a word for these people in ancient Greek: the *komodoumenoi* – ‘those made fun of in comedy’. Comedy didn’t necessarily kill off their careers, but it did police the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

Dirty laundry

Ancient commentators often saluted comedy’s vicious attacks as the hallmark of a real democracy. In fact, Athenians were so convinced that comedy was the best way for their city to air its dirty laundry that they set up a separate festival for comedy in the city. This took place in January – a month when

CLASSIC COMEDY Wasps

Aristophanes lampoons Athens’ natural ‘sore-point’

This play from 422 BC pokes fun at one of the most fundamental institutions of Athenian democracy: the law courts. The play’s central character is addicted to acting as a jury member in the law courts, to the extent that he is unable to do anything else with his life. His son tries to barricade him into his home to break this obsession, before offering to let his father stage court cases at home which he can judge – including the case of two dogs. One of these dogs has accused the other dog of stealing good cheese and not sharing it. The court case descends into farce – as does the rest of the play, with the father causing havoc both inside the house and out in the community.

The play gleefully lampoons the natural ‘sore-point’ of the Athenian democratic system: the law courts, places where everyone should be equal but where the more gifted speaker and manipulator could often swing the vote. Aristophanes wanted his audience to be uncomfortable even when considering some of the most central and celebrated elements of their democracy.

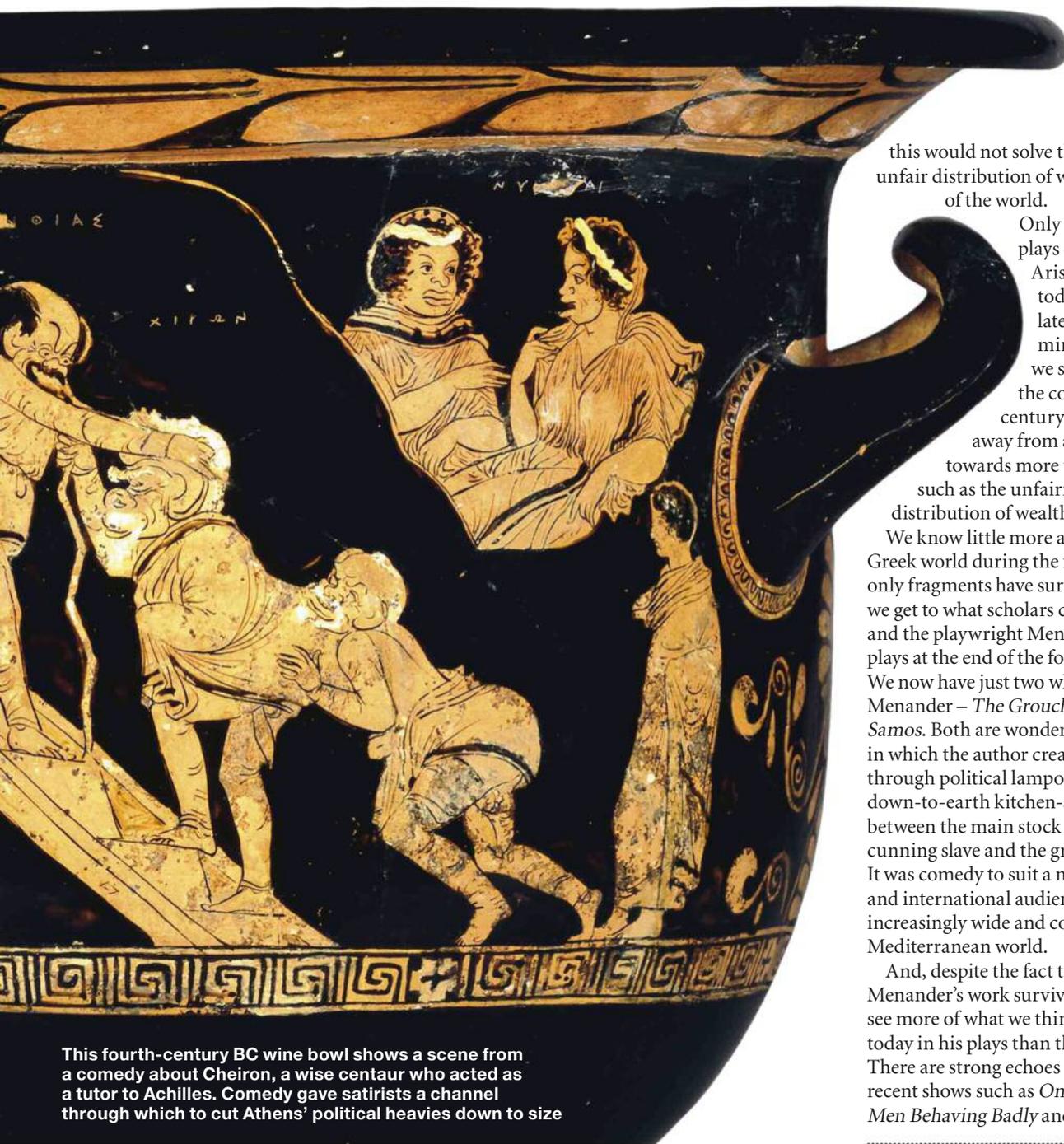
A flyer for a performance of *Wasps* – Aristophanes’ stinging satire on Athenian justice – at King’s College London in 1981



poor sailing conditions made it much harder for non-Athenians to attend. This new

festival, the Lenaia, was where the Athenians could poke fun at themselves in private. Aristophanes was once even taken to court for putting on a comedy at the tragedy festival, the City Dionysia, because, it was argued, it was not right for it to be heard at such an open occasion.

But Aristophanes’ comedy does more than



This fourth-century BC wine bowl shows a scene from a comedy about Cheiron, a wise centaur who acted as a tutor to Achilles. Comedy gave satirists a channel through which to cut Athens' political heavies down to size

just lampoon individuals. It also served as a wake-up call to Athenians more generally. My favourite Aristophanic comedy is *Knights*. In it, an old man called Demos, the ancient Greek for 'the people', is deluded and cuckolded by his cunning slaves – one of whom, it just so happens, resembles a powerful Athenian politician of the day called Cleon. For the whole play the old man Demos seems limp and incapable. But at the end of the play, it is the cunning slave who loses out. Demos, with a bit of help, is still really in charge: a message to the Athenians never to let themselves be led by the nose. No wonder it won first prize in the dramatic competition held at the festival in 424 BC.

But Aristophanes is not always so upbeat. In one of his best-known plays, *Lysistrata* (performed in 411 BC), the women of Athens go on a sex strike to force the men to stop fighting. They take over the Acropolis and capture the keys to the city's bank vaults. The play – despite all its bawdiness – highlights the sad realities of a war that has been ongoing in the Greek world for some time, and which showed little sign of ending.

Aristophanes' early fourth-century BC play *Ploutos* (Wealth) is even more depressing. Wealth is blind and so distributes his favours unevenly between the worthy and the non-worthy. But a plan to restore Wealth's sight only makes the characters realise that

this would not solve the problem either: unfair distribution of wealth is just the way of the world.

Only 11 of the 40 or so plays originally written by Aristophanes survive today. In some ways, his later plays, like *Ploutos*, mirror the same change we saw in tragedy during the course of the fourth century BC: a turning away from an Athenian focus towards more universal issues, such as the unfairness of the distribution of wealth.

We know little more about comedy in the Greek world during the fourth century, as only fragments have survived. That is, until we get to what scholars called 'new comedy' and the playwright Menander, who wrote plays at the end of the fourth century BC. We now have just two whole plays left to us by Menander – *The Grouch* and *The Woman of Samos*. Both are wonderful character studies, in which the author creates humour not through political lampooning, but through down-to-earth kitchen-sink interaction between the main stock characters like the cunning slave and the grumpy old man. It was comedy to suit a much more diverse and international audience across an increasingly wide and complex Mediterranean world.

And, despite the fact that so little of Menander's work survives, in a way we can see more of what we think of as comedy today in his plays than those of Aristophanes. There are strong echoes of Menander in recent shows such as *One Foot in the Grave*, *Men Behaving Badly* and *Friends*. **H**

Dr Michael Scott is assistant professor in classics and ancient history at the University of Warwick. See michaelscottweb.com

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