

WOMEN AND THE ATHENIAN DRAMATIC FESTIVALS

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Scholarship in recent years has shown increased interest in the social context and political significance of Athenian drama.¹ What role did the dramatic festivals play as one *polis* institution among others? What did the *polis* expect of the poets? And what were the connections between the characters in the dramas and the spectators in the audience? Such questions require us to ask about the women of the *polis*, but here we confront an immediate problem on which scholars have yet to reach consensus: whether women participated in the dramatic festivals.²

If women did not participate, or were actually excluded, how do we explain this departure from their customary inclusion in festivals, particularly Dionysiac ones? And what about the theater's vivid heroines, its pervasive themes of love and strife between men and women, its frequent expressions of sympathy for and protest from women that ring so true to life? Was the female presence in drama for the men only? So Zeitlin: "Theater," she says, "uses the feminine for the purpose of imagining a fuller model for the masculine self, and 'playing the other' opens that self to those often banned emotions of fear and pity."³ If, on the other hand, women did participate, why does the "notional or proper

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In this paper the plays of Aristophanes are cited from the Oxford texts of M. Platnauer, *Peace* (1964), K. J. Dover, *Clouds* (1968), D. M. MacDowell, *Wasps* (1971), J. Henderson, *Lysistrata* (1987, rev. 1990), otherwise from V. Coulon (Budé: Paris 1923–30). Fragments of Old Comedy are cited from R. Kassel and C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin and New York 1983–) to date, Aristophanes–Xenophon, otherwise from Th. Kock, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Leipzig 1880–88).

¹ For a collection of recent approaches see *Nothing to Do With Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, edd. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1990).

² Important discussions are O. Navarre, *Utrum mulieres Athenienses scaenicos ludos spectaverit necne* (Toulouse 1900); B. B. Rogers, *The Ecclesiazusae of Aristophanes* (London 1902) xxix–xxxv; A. E. Haigh, *The Attic Theatre*³ (Oxford 1907) 324–29; V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (New York 1962) 27n. 2; A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*², rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford 1968) 263–65; K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (California 1972) 17; A. J. Podlecki, "Could Women Attend the Theater in Ancient Athens? A Collection of Testimonia," *Ancient World* 21 (1990) 27–43.

³ "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," in Winkler and Zeitlin (above, note 1) 63–96 (85).

audience" seem to be one only of "men in various age-classes"?⁴ Did the women somehow not count? This paper reexamines the evidence for women's participation, some of which has not been cited in previous discussions of this problem. I hope to show that it is very likely that women did participate, and I will discuss some of the consequences for our understanding of the dramatic festivals that arise on that assumption.

I. Exclusion?

First let us consider some of the *a priori* assumptions that have inclined scholars (first in 1796, apparently⁵) against women's attendance at the dramas, that is, presumptive reasons why women might have been excluded

Drama, like all public poetry in the classical period, was written, produced and performed only by men, and the dramatic festivals were organized and controlled by the *demos*, the sovereign corporation of adult male citizens. In drama, as in all public contexts, citizen males spoke on behalf of, and in this case also in the guise of, the women,⁶ to whom public use of the word was denied and about whom conventional protocols of silence (e.g. Thuc. 2.45.2) and public invisibility prevailed. It is therefore not very surprising that the audience, when it was addressed or otherwise noticed, was conventionally thought of as male.

But this situation does not in itself rule out female spectators, for an actual audience does not invariably match its conventional designation. In such cases we must distinguish the actual and the notional audience. Roman comedy, for example, almost invariably refers to its audience as male, even though occasional remarks reveal the presence of women (Plaut. *Poen.* 28–35), and if Shakespeare often noticed female spectators (see above, note 6), Marlowe could address his audience as "gentlemen" (*Dr. Faustus*, 7). Ruth Scodel refers me to John Playford's *The English Dance Master: Plain and Simple Rules for the Dancing of Country-Dances* (London 1651), whose preface defends dancing as educational and as a recreation suitable for gentlemen, even though country dances were danced by mixed-sex couples and one of Playford's dances is described from the women's side. Similarly, Ovid created a notional audience of men and loose women by excluding decent women from the intended audience of his *Amores* (1.31–34), even though they are included in the poem's survey of seduction techniques (e.g. 1.579–80) and did in fact form part of its audience (cf. *Tr.* 2.303–6). Even in our era of growing sexual and racial equality in the public spheres, it is often painfully obvious that changes in actual behavior typically precede changes in notional reference-systems.

⁴ J. J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragodia* and *Polis*," in Winkler and Zeitlin (above, note 1) 20–62 (39n. 58).

⁵ By one Bottiger, according to Navarre's survey (above, note 2).

⁶ As on the English stage until c. 1660, even though women had long attended the theater (cf. A. Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* [New York 1941] 74–79) and are frequently addressed in the epilogues of Shakespeare's plays. For discussions of the dynamics of female impersonation in the Elizabethan theater see L. Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men. A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford 1982); M. McFeeley, *Elizabethan Views of Women and Shakespeare's Comic Heroines* (diss. Michigan 1984).

Furthermore, if we take the reference-system of Attic drama at face value, we are required to believe that the poets' portrayals of women, with their concerns and their complaints, were aimed only at men. But do the women of drama seem so untrue to life, or their concerns and complaints so male-oriented, as to justify the assumption that female spectators would have found in them nothing of interest? Was the women's response to their Euripidean portrayal, as described by Aristophanes, mere male fantasy? The answers to these questions will inevitably be subjective to a degree, but the process of answering them should not be hobbled at the outset by assumptions masquerading as facts.

Nineteenth-century scholars thought that Athenian women and boys, like their own, must have been shielded from theatrical indecency, especially comedy. Aristotle anticipated this attitude as regards boys, but he was clearly protesting the normal practice, since boys' presence in the theater is well-attested.⁷ As for women, Rogers well states the objection that in fifth-century Athens indecency was hardly confined to the comic dramas: "An Athenian maid or matron, walking through the streets of her own city, could not choose but witness on every side, and indeed at every door, signs and symbols of (to Christian minds) 'unspeakable indecency.'"⁸ In the porches of many Athenian houses, or in the street outside, stood an ithyphallic herm (Thuc. 6.27), and genital amulets and images were in common use.⁹ Athens was, after all, an agricultural society whose cults, male and female, featured plenty of sexual language and action, especially the cults of Demeter and Dionysos, where if any class was excluded it was usually the men.¹⁰ Thus in *Acharnians* Dikaiopolis' unmarried daughter is the basket-carrier in the ribald phallic procession of the Rural Dionysia, and a fragment of Menander's *Synaristosai* shows that other women could attend the procession of the Dionysia too. In *Frogs* the chorus of Eleusinian initiates recalls seeing (i.e. in the Eleusinian cult of Demeter) a sexy young girl dancing for Iakkhos.¹¹

A related hypothesis is for partial exclusion: women could be shielded from "indecency" if they watched only the tragedies. But this hypothesis is logistically unlikely and in any case useless for solving the problem of indecency. Tragic and comic competitions often took place on the same day and in that order,¹² so that if women had to be turned out midway we must imagine a procedure so colorful that we would surely have heard about it. In addition,

⁷ *Pol.* 7.1336b20; for boys cf. *Clouds* 537–39, *Peace* 50–53, 765–66, *Ekkl.* 1146, *Eup.* 261, *Platon* 222, *Alexis* 125.9, *Men. Dysc.* 965–67, *Sam.* 733–34, *Thphr. Ch.* 9, *Luc. Anach.* 22.

⁸ (See above, note 2) xxxii.

⁹ See C. Johns, *Sex or Symbol: Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (Austin 1982) 62–75.

¹⁰ See T. Wächter, *Reinheitsvorschriften im griechischen Kult*, *RGVV* 9.1 (Giessen 1910) 130–33; for sexuality and the sacred generally see R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983) 74–103.

¹¹ *Ach.* 238–62 (Dikaiopolis' wife watches from the roof); *Men. fr.* 382: "For it was the procession of the Dionysia [...] he followed me all the way to my doorway, then hanging about and fawning over me and my mother he recognized me"; *Frogs* 409–12. See further Pickard-Cambridge (above, note 2) 61–63.

¹² Cf. *Birds* 785–96.

women at the tragedies would have had to watch the satyr-dramas too, which were sometimes, at least in their language, as "indecent" as the comedies.¹³

Then there is the more general question of the public mobility and visibility of women. It is true that *deme* and *polis*, in their narrowly political, deliberative and competitive aspects, were the preserve of citizen males only, and the group ideal for women was to be seen in public spaces as infrequently as practicable. But the sphere of religion and cult, which embraced both political and domestic life, operated under an older and more inclusive set of imperatives: "in the sacred and ritual activities of the community the active presence of women in the public world [was] not merely tolerated but required."¹⁴ In this "other" Athens women could occupy priestly positions, or otherwise publicly participate, in over three hundred cults.¹⁵ It is hard to believe that the major priestesses, at least, did not attend the dramatic performances, as they certainly did in Hadrianic times, when their special front-row seats were inscribed,¹⁶ or that the basket-carrier who led the procession at the City Dionysia¹⁷ was the only female present or was barred from watching the plays, to say nothing of the Basilinna, the official wife of Dionysos.¹⁸ In Aristophanes' *Peace* the Polias priestess Lysimakhe seems to have been invoked by name, and in *Lysistrata* her formative influence on the heroine is fairly transparent.¹⁹ Was she not physically present? Finally, the ideal norms of public propriety, domestic seclusion and official invisibility applied only to *citizen* women; no such protocol applied to non-citizen women (foreigners, metics and slaves) who might *choose* to behave respectably but who were presumably free to go where they liked. But in any case, restrictions on the mobility of citizen women were relaxed, sometimes notoriously, in the case of festivals.

In this connection the general inclusivity of the dramatic festivals should be mentioned. The largest political entity, the Assembly, accommodated 6000, while the theater accommodated as many as 17000.²⁰ Here not only were boys, youths and men included but also foreigners, allies, metics, slaves, even

¹³ On the sexual language of satyr-drama, which needs a separate study, see now J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse. Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*² (Oxford and New York 1990) 244–45.

¹⁴ J. Gould, "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens," *JHS* 100 (1980) 38–51 (50). For women's participation in the religious life of the demes, see D. Whitehead, *The Demes of Attica* (Princeton 1986) 77–81.

¹⁵ J. Martha, *Les sacerdoces atheniens* (Paris 1882); B. Jordan, *Servants of the Gods* (Göttingen 1980); J. Turner, *Hiereiai: Aquisition of Feminine Priesthoods in Ancient Greece* (Diss. Santa Barbara 1983).

¹⁶ *IG* ii 5063a, 5093–5164.

¹⁷ See Pickard-Cambridge (above, note 2).

¹⁸ See H. W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (Ithaca 1977) 110–12, 188–91; E. Simon, *Festivals of Attica* (Madison and London 1983) 96–98.

¹⁹ *Peace* 992, cf. *Lys.* 554; see Henderson, *Lysistrata* (above, note 1) xxxviii–xl. Similarly suggestive are such appeals to Athena Nike as *Knights* 581–94, *Lys.* 317–18.

²⁰ Pl. *Symp.* 175E (of Agathon's victory in 417/6) speaks of 'more than 30000' (cf. also *Ar. Ec.* 1132–33), which cannot be literally true and probably expresses the conventional number of citizens plus others.

prisoners, who could be released in order to attend.²¹ This list omits only women. If women really were subject to a unique exclusion, it is very strange that no ancient source mentions or even alludes to it, though we must consider the possibility that our ancient sources considered women's exclusion to be self-evident. But in view of the preceding discussion, it is hard to think of a reason for such an exclusion and even harder to imagine that the women excluded themselves. Why would they not have wanted to watch the dramas?

Certainly the role of spectator was not an unfamiliar one for women. In *Thesmophoriazousai* the chorus of women complain of unfair seating at such women's festivals as the Stenia, the Skira and others.²² Nor was the idea that women might enjoy poetry at all strange. In Homer women listen to bards in the *oikos*-based symposium and to singers in the agora (indeed the first attested audience-reaction comes from Penelope), and in the archaic city choral, lyric and monodic poets typically presented the viewpoint of each different group and category of residents to the public as a whole. Nor is there any good reason to suppose that women's enjoyment of these traditional genres of poetry was curtailed in classical Athens. The symposium was now exclusively male, but the women still had the festivals with their processions and dances. And, as the chorus in Euripides' *Medeia* say, women's disability to compose poetry did not prevent them from hearing it (421–30). We should not imagine that women, who otherwise played a prominent role in the Panathenaia, were unable also to attend the rhapsodic performances of hymns and epics that were the artistic centerpiece of that "All Athenian" festival. Plato says that mothers and nurses are the primary purveyors of traditional myths to children:²³ how could they have come to know these myths if not by attending musical festivals?

This leaves the dramatic festivals, which as a creation of the Athenian democracy might have been organized on principles that did not apply to festivals inherited from archaic times. In fifth-century Athens, by contrast with the archaic *polis*, participation in the official *polis* was reserved for the *demos*, citizen males over 18 years old, and its official discourse was conventionally silent about "others," except when a male citizen's behavior with regard to these "others" could be portrayed as somehow harming the official *polis*. The emphasis was on *polis* unity as represented and safeguarded by the executive *demos*. But drama, at least in its subject matter, seems to have ignored the distinction between *demos* and "others" that was enforced in official discourse, for drama included in its portrayal and analysis of the *polis* the interests of women

²¹ Boys: see above, note 7; foreigners, metics and allies: *Ach.* 502–8, *Eup.* 254; slaves: *Pl. Gorg.* 502B–D, *Thphr. Ch.* 9.5; prisoners: *D.* 22.68 with Σ , cf. *Pl. Leg.* 637B.

²² *Th.* 830 ff., where the status of one's husband or son determines the quality of one's seat.

²³ *Rep.* 377B11 ff., cf. *Com. Adesp.* 857 Kock; M. Detienne, *L'Invention de la mythologie* (Paris 1981), index at "vieilles femmes"; M. Massaro, "Aniles Fabellae," *SIFC* 49 (1977) 104–35.

and children, of distinct social and political groups, and even of market-people and non-citizens.²⁴

It would seem that in fifth-century Athens the dramatic festivals had become an outlet for thoughts social and political that could not be expressed in other public fora and a venue for at least some of those members of the community who were debarred from other public assemblies. Since we have found no compelling reasons to assume that women were uniquely debarred from the very festivals in which their world was so often portrayed, we are entitled to look for evidence that they attended them.

II. Evidence for Attendance

While no ancient sources mention or even presuppose exclusion or non-attendance of women at the dramatic festivals, some are best explained on the assumption that women did attend and may also reveal something of the nature of their participation. None of these sources rule out the possibility that some women did not attend: it is conceivable, for example, that poor women, women with small children to care for, women from distant demes, or women for some reason shy of public visibility would have been less likely to attend than others. Surely there were also some men who did not attend. The question at issue is whether at least some women attended.

In *Gorgias*, Plato's Sokrates, in discussing the propriety of drama, especially tragedy, says that drama is "a kind of rhetoric that is addressed to such a *demos* as is composed of children together with women and men both slave and free," and he goes on to compare this theatrical *demos* with "the *demos* of Athenian citizens and other free *demoi* in other cities." Similarly in *Laws*, tragedy is called a form of rhetoric addressed to "boys, women and the whole crowd (τὸν πάντα ὄχλον)," and the preferences of festival audiences are thus described: "children like the conjurer, older boys the comic poet, young men, educated women (αἱ πεπαιδευμέναι τῶν γυναικῶν) and the general public (τὸ πλῆθος πάντων) like tragedy."²⁵ These passages conform with the model, sketched above, that distinguishes the inclusive festive audience from the exclusive political ones. The emphasis on rhetoric and the alignment of theatrical and political audiences suggest that the women in question did not merely read or hear about the dramas but watched them. And there is no reason to think that Plato was thinking only of fourth-century practice: had there been a change we would surely have been told about it, and the fourth-century dramatic festivals in other respects show little essential change in practice from the fifth century. The major change was the establishment (apparently in the fourth century) of the

²⁴ For Attic drama as the heir of poetic functions that had been structurally more pervasive in the archaic *polis* see S. Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London and Boston 1978) 239–40.

²⁵ *Gorg.* 502B–D; *Leg.* 817C; 658A–D. For πλῆθος (general) as distinct from δῆμος (political) cf. [X.] *Ath.* 2.18 (c. 425), "the victim [of comic ridicule] is generally not one of the *demos* or the *plethos* but a rich, well-born or powerful individual."

Theoric Fund, but that was designed to assist not people previously excluded but people who had been unable to afford a ticket.²⁶

That Plato specifies educated women is interesting. Since citizen women are, as we will see, included in other references to the theatrical audience, the specification "educated" here need not (though it may) refer particularly to foreign, metic or slave women (like *hetairai*). It does not seem to indicate that only educated women attended, because were that normally the case there would be no need for the specification. It was probably added "to justify making any reference to this sex's likely preference among the literary genres,"²⁷ and perhaps also to imply that the less educated enjoyed what Plato considered inferior genres.

Later theatrical anecdotes, whatever we may think of their historicity, similarly assume women's attendance and should not be dismissed out of hand, since "two gossip writers of the fifth century, Stesimbrotos and Ion, were still read during the Roman Empire."²⁸ We hear that Aiskhylos' *Eumenides* frightened women into miscarriage;²⁹ that Alkibiades' khoregic robe was admired by both sexes;³⁰ that for Menander nothing was more agreeable than victory in the comic contest while his girlfriend Glykera watched from her seat in the theater;³¹ and that the *khoregos* Melanthios once rebuked an actor who demanded more queenly garments by pointing out that "Phokion's wife is never attended by more than one servant, but you must show off (ἄλαζονεύῃ) and so corrupt the women's quarters," that is, by setting a bad example of vanity and expense that the women would see and want to emulate.³²

Let us now turn to the comic poets, who unlike tragic and satyric poets frequently address or otherwise notice the spectators and where there are several passages that strongly suggest the presence of women in the audience.

The chorus in *Lysistrata* provides what seems to be the most explicit reference to women in the audience, a unique case of direct address (1043–53): "We are not prepared, gentlemen of the audience, to say even one disparaging thing about any fellow citizen, but quite the contrary, to say and do only good things, because your present troubles are enough. So let every man and woman notify us, whoever needs some small change—two or three minas—because it's in our homes and we've purses to put it in."³³ Sommerstein comments that "the women in question (who are assumed, it will be observed, to be financially their

²⁶ For the Theoric Fund see Pickard-Cambridge (above, note 2) 266–68. Plu. *Per.* 9.2–3 (following Theopompos) attributes the first *theorika* to Perikles ("for bribing the πλῆθος") cf. note 25, above); D. 44.37 says that the *theorikon* of his day was paid by deme officials to full citizens on the deme register.

²⁷ A. M. Bowie, *LCM* 7.8 (1982) 112.

²⁸ Dover (above, note 2) 17n. 1.

²⁹ A. *Vita* 9; Pollux 4.110.

³⁰ Athen. 12.534c (probably quoting Satyros).

³¹ Alciph. *Ep.* 2.3.

³² Plu. *Phoc.* 19.

³³ Henderson *ad loc.* is unnecessarily cautious in saying that this address does not demonstrate the presence of women because it may envisage private (neighborhood) celebration: that may be, but the *invitation* is still announced by the chorus *qua* chorus and therefore to the spectators *qua* spectators.

own mistresses) need not have been of citizen status.”³⁴ True enough, but the reference to financial competence need not rule out citizen women: recent research shows that in her financial dealings citizen wives enjoyed more latitude in practice than the ideal norms of law and prescriptive custom suggest.³⁵ “Two or three minas” is indeed a large sum, much larger than a citizen woman would normally need for domestic purposes, but it need not be taken seriously: comic exaggeration is set up by the preceding ἀργυρίδιον (“small change”) and exploited in the sequel, which shows that the offer is facetious (1056–57). Thus the natural implication of the passage (money and not insults will be offered to “fellow citizens”) may be taken as referring to citizen women.

An interesting feature of this passage is that both women and men are addressed under the rubric ἄνδρες, which, along with other masculine categories such as θεώμενοι and θεαταί, was the conventional way to characterize the theatrical audience as a whole. When the constituent members of the audience are listed they are typically males in various age-classes.³⁶ For the Athenians, apparently, there was no “Ladies and Gentlemen,” only “Gentlemen.”³⁷ It would seem that in the *Lysistrata*-passage we see a rare momentary shift from the notional to the actual audience.

If the actual audience contained women, where did they sit? What hints we have seem to suggest that they sat in their own section, probably in the rear. If that is so, women were placed physically as well as notionally in the less important segment of the audience.

In a fragment of Alexis’ *Gynaikokratia* (41), a woman complains that “here we women have to sit in the very last wedge of seats (περὶ τὴν ἐσχάτην κερκίδα) to watch (θεωρεῖν), just like foreign women (ὡς ξένας).” Since the only other fragment of this play (42) mentions Hippokles as being ὁ ζωμοτάρχιος ὑποκριτής, and since κερκίς specifically designated a wedge of

³⁴ A. H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Lysistrata* (Warminster 1990), *ad loc.*

³⁵ See in general D. Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh 1979); R. van Bremen, “Women and Wealth,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, edd. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (Detroit 1983) 223–42; L. Foxhall, “Household, Gender and Property in Classical Athens,” *CQ* 39 (1989) 22–44.

³⁶ In *Ar. Pax* 50–53 a slave explains the plot “to the children and the striplings and the men of position and yes, even to these supermen as well”; in *Eccl.* 1444–46 Bleepyros recommends inviting not only those spectators and judges who liked the play to a celebratory banquet but also “everybody, leaving no one out but freely inviting the old man, the young man, the boy”; in *Men. Dysc.* 965–67 Getas says to the spectators, “if you’ve enjoyed our play, give us your kind applause, young men, boys, men”; in *Sam.* 733–34 the request for applause is addressed to “fine boys, youths, old men, men, everybody (πάντες).” The comic poet Platon (fr. 222) addresses παῖδες, γέροντες, μενράκια, παλλάκια. This last category is explained by the testimonial source of the fragment (Pollux 2.9) as referring not to concubines but to boys; for this usage cf. also Eust. 763.21, 1419.51 (= Ail. Dion. p. 7) ἔστιν εὐρεῖν παρὰ τοῖς παλαιοῖς, Hesych. p. 229. But without a context for the fragment we cannot be sure that Platon was not referring to concubines (*hetairai*?); cf. note 38, below.

³⁷ This is the case even when a female chorus complains to the spectators, as in the parabasis of *Thesmophoriazousai* (n. 22, above), where “throughout their address they contrast the women sometimes with men in general and sometimes with the audience, quite indifferently, as though the two classes—the audience and the men—were for this purpose identical,” Rogers (above, note 2), xxxii.

seats in the theater, we are entitled to assume that the festival in question was theatrical. The complainers are obviously citizen women and evidently complain about their *customary* situation (all women had to sit in back), a situation which, as the play's title suggests, they plan to change, presumably by commandeering the men's seats or at least separating citizens from foreigners.³⁸

In this connection it is worth noting the apparent absence of comic fantasies about women demanding to attend the plays, in contrast to those about women taking over the assembly or serving in the army, and that in *Ekklesiazousai* the enumeration of the many activities that heretofore had been strictly male privileges does not include attendance at the theater. In Aristophanes' play *Skenas Katalambanousai* women compete with men over booths or shelters (*skenai*), not seats, at a festival which the fragments strongly suggest is a theatrical festival with women spectators.³⁹

That women and other "others" may in fact have had to sit in back at the theater would not be surprising. In view of Athenian notions of sexual propriety generally, women (citizen women, at any rate) would probably not have sat with the men or in any section of the theater that offered a better view than the men had (major priestesses excepted). Thus their general public subordination to men would have been reflected in the theater seating, just as the hierarchy of seating at the women's festivals was determined by the public status of one's son or husband (*Th.* 830ff.): a sign of the festival's public or "official" aspect.⁴⁰

If true, this hypothesis about the location of women spectators—separately seated and probably in the rear—helps to explain a joke in Aristophanes' *Peace* (962–67):

(Trygaios) And throw the spectators some of the barleyseeds (κριθῶν). (Slave) OK then. (Tr.) Is that it? (Sl.) By Hermes, yes: of all these spectators there isn't one who hasn't got a barleyseed. (Tr.) But the women haven't got any. (Sl.) Well, their husbands will give it to them tonight!

The joke plays on the double meaning of κριθαί "barleyseeds" and κριθή "penis," so that the passage has been interpreted as meaning that each spectator has a κριθή, but no woman does, because all the spectators are male. In addition, there may be an underlying concern that the city's women have not shared in the peace-celebrations.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the conversation in the passage is about the spectators, so that if we assume non-attendance by the women the sudden reference to the populace at large sounds awkwardly abrupt, even to set

³⁸ Σ Ar. *Ec.* 22 mentions a decree of (S)phyromakhos providing separate seats for men and women, and for free women and courtesans. But since the commented text concerns the assembly, where no women could be present, this decree may well be only the commentator's bad inference from the text, though his alternate explanation about a tragic actor's mispronunciation is basically correct.

³⁹ Cf. fr. 487 (a lekythos is called συνθεάτρια), 488 (the poet replies to Kratinos' charge [fr. 342] that he imitates Euripides), 490 (mention of the actor Kallipides), 495 (mention of the διδάσκαλος), 503 (mention of the choric *tritastasis*, cf. Arist. *Met.* Δ 11.1018B28). *Skenai*, temporary shelters for those attending a festival, are attested for the theater of Dionysos in *Pax* 731, *Th.* 658.

⁴⁰ For theater-seating in general see now Winkler (above, note 4) 37–42.

⁴¹ So Pickard-Cambridge (above, note 2) 264.

up a bawdy joke, which could easily have been set up less awkwardly. The passage sounds more natural on the assumption not that the women were absent but that they were sitting too far back to catch the barleyseeds, or that the slave did not throw them any. Since the husbands would be unlikely to have come to or departed from the theater with their wives, who would have attended in the company of other women, the delivery of the barleyseeds would have had to wait until nighttime. As in the passage from *Lysistrata* discussed above, the shift in reference from the spectators as all male to the spectators as including women represents a movement from notional to actual audience.

If women attended, and were seated, separately from their husbands, the dramatic festivals (like others) would have allowed a certain scope for hanky-panky, and the comic poets occasionally play with that idea. In *Birds* the Koryphaios tells the spectators (785–96):

There's nothing better or more agreeable than to grow wings. For example...if there's any one of you who happens to be having an affair with a married woman, and he sees the lady's husband in the Councillors' seats, he could have flown off, fucked her, and flown from her house back here again.

This passage has been used to argue that some women at least did not attend the theater (which it does) or that none did (which it does not).⁴² The comic situation envisioned requires only the possibility that some husbands might go to the theater while their wives stayed home (this might in fact have been the case with a Councillor's wife). The winged adulterer may then spontaneously capitalize on this opportunity to find the wife alone at home, or he could set up a tryst, confirm that the husband was at the theater and that the wife would stay home, have sex with the wife, and be back in time to see the comedies.

In *Thesmophoriazousai*, whose plot has the matrons of Athens pass a death-sentence on Euripides for revealing their secret vices to the husbands, a woman complains that Euripides has made husbands suspicious: "So when our husbands come home from the theater the first thing they do is give us a suspicious lookover and check the house for a hidden lover" (395–97). Were this remark a fragment, it would be evidence compatible with the hypothesis that women, or at least some women, did not attend the theater. But earlier in this passage the speaker mentions *seeing* the plays herself (386 ὁρῶσα), so that her argument about unreasonable suspiciousness may gain force if the husband looks for a lover even though he knows his wife has been at the festival. On the other hand, if the festival afforded wives an opportunity for a tryst or even a pick-up, the husband's suspiciousness may not have sounded excessive.

⁴² H. Box, "Aristophanes: *Birds* 785–96 and *Thesmophoriazousai* 450–51," *CR* 14 (1964) 241–42, writes of the passage as a whole, "All the situations described have this in common, that they are unforeseen...in none does the spectator enter the theatre with the thought of using them...The lover sees the husband not by chance but because as a Councillor the latter is in a reserved seat which is conspicuous. The position is mentioned to make it plausible that one could see a particular person in so large an audience. It is anyone who is having an affair with a married woman, not anyone who is having an affair with one such who happens to dislike the theatre, who is parallel to the spectators in the other two situations."

In classical Athens an adulterous wife was a laughing matter only at comic festivals: the Phaidra of Euripides' first *Hippolytos* created a scandal. But if we imagine that only the men were scandalized, we have to explain Aristophanes' accounts of the impact of this and other Euripidean portrayals of women on their actual counterparts, for Aristophanes seems to assume that Athenian women were not only familiar with the dramas but also interested in their portrayal in them.

The indignant wife of *Thesmophoriazousai*, quoted above, had begun her speech with wholesale denunciation of Euripides (383–94):

By the Twain, I have not risen to speak, fellow women, out of any personal ambition, but because I have for a long time endured seeing us (ὁρῶσα) dragged through the mire by Euripides, that son of a woman who sells wild herbs and whose own reputation is everyway and everywhere bad. With what evil has this fellow not besmirched us? Where, on any occasion where there are spectators, tragic actors and choruses, has he spared us his disparagement, that we are adulterous, man-crazy, bibulous, disloyal, chattery, unwholesome, the bane of men's lives?

The thrust of the passage seems to be that the women could not *see* any tragedies without having to endure Euripides' slanders. Another woman complains (446–52):

My husband died in Kypros, leaving me with five children that I've had a struggle to feed by working in the myrtle business making garlands. Until recently I was barely making do, but now this person who works in the tragedy business has persuaded the men that gods don't exist, so that my sales are down 50%.

We may ask why, on the theological point at issue, Euripides has persuaded only the men and why there is no hint of a contrast between male and female spectators.⁴³ Perhaps this speech again reflects the notional identity of the audience as male, or simply assumes that since men are the main customers for garlands the attitude of the women is irrelevant. In the latter case "50%" does not mean that only the women were still buying but that religious buying had fallen off. The speaker goes on to say that she must return to the market to fill an order for twenty men, that is, for a symposion not a religious occasion.

One of the interesting complaints about Euripides in *Frogs* is this exchange (1049–56):

(Euripides) And how, most miserable of men, have my Stheneboias harmed the *polis*? (Aiskhylos) Because you convinced (ἀνέπειθας) women who are noble and the wives of noble men to kill themselves out of shame on account of your Bellerophons. (Eur.) Was my story about Phaidra true or not? (Aiskh.) By god it was, but the poet of all people must conceal what's bad, not expose it or put it on stage. For children the teacher is the schoolmaster, but for young men it's the poet. We simply must say only what's good.

⁴³ So Box (above, note 42).

Interesting is the emphasis on the normative and didactic functions of tragedy, here incorporated also by comedy,⁴⁴ which informs the entire play and which anticipates the criticisms made by Plato, who also was concerned with the effects of drama on women as well as on boys and men. That "young men" are singled out here as the ones adversely influenced no more implies that women were not present than it implies that older men were not present: education, the emphasis here, was not conventionally thought of as an activity of great concern to women (*Lys.* 1124–27) or adult men. The younger men are specified because the effect on the women has already been described and because young men are the most impressionable men and the likeliest candidates for emulation of a Bellerophon. By contrast, "Aiskhylos" carefully (we might say gallantly) avoids the idea that any citizen woman might emulate a Phaidra.⁴⁵

III. Conclusions

No ancient source confirms the hypothesis that women as a class, or any category of women, were excluded from the Athenian dramatic festivals, and our knowledge generally of social, political and religious conditions in classical Attika encourages the assumption that any woman was free to attend if she wanted to and if her husband or *kyrios* had no objection. In addition, a significant number of ancient sources are best explained on the assumptions that at least some women did attend, that they took a lively interest in the plays, and that their responses were occasionally lively enough to prompt comic notice. If these assumptions are correct, the fact that the audience was conventionally addressed or otherwise referred to as male reflects a normative distinction between a notional audience of men (political) and an actual audience that included women (festive). Finally, the fact that women were a prominent subject in the theater, but not in those public contexts that were reserved for male citizens, entitles us to ask whether there was a connection between subject-matter and audience, that is, whether female portrayals were written with female spectators in mind.⁴⁶

A full answer to this question can hardly be attempted here, but in formulating an answer tragedy will have to be considered along with topical comedy. For tragic characters, despite their mythical settings, do not reflect attitudes of the distant past that bear no resemblance to contemporary reality, nor do they adhere to a fixed set of inherited stereotypes. Striking changes of attitude toward women can be observed between the plays of Aiskhylos and those of Euripides and between the early plays of Kratinos and the later plays of Aristophanes. In

⁴⁴ For comic borrowing of this function see O. Taplin, "Tragedy and Tragedy," *CQ* 33 (1983) 331–33.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that comic poets, like orators, felt free to attack an opponent's wife or mother but never his unmarried daughter; see J. Henderson, "The Demos and the Comic Competition," in Winkler/Zeitlin (above, note 1) 271–313 (288–89).

⁴⁶ On this question, asked only rarely because of the assumption of an all-male audience, see now G. A. H. Chapman, "Women in Early Greek Comedy: Fact, Fantasy and Feminism," University of Natal Inaugural Lecture (Pietermaritzburg 1985).

particular, sympathetic portrayals of women seem to be increasingly represented in tragedy and comedy toward the end of the century, and, during the Peloponnesian War, voices of female protest that ring very true to life grow ever louder; so too does the subject of male versus female interpretations of civic ideals both practical and philosophical. On the tragic side we need only think of the development from Aiskhylos' Klytaimestra, Niobe and Danaids, to Sophokles' Antigone, Prokne (*Tereus*) and Deianeira, to Euripides' Medea, Melanippe, Kreousa, Phaidra and Stheneboia. On the comic side, it is striking that heroines with advice for the *polis* first appear in 411, in the aftermath (not coincidentally) of the disaster in Sicily.⁴⁷ Plato and other members of the Sokratic circle also make it clear that in the new intellectualism, spurred by the pressures of a developing democracy and a great war, traditional attitudes toward women were questioned along with other traditional beliefs.⁴⁸

It is hard to believe that, if women attended the plays, they were disinterested spectators, mere eavesdroppers on a male drag show that was remote from their world and their experience. Certainly that is not the view of our ancient sources or the response of many contemporary women to the plays. Surely Athenian women did, and were expected to, identify with or, as Aristophanes warns, react against the female characters that they saw on stage. Dramatists may have conceived their women largely from the male point of view, as "radically other,"⁴⁹ but that does not necessarily mean that their female characters were untrue to life. The male conceptual viewpoint was in fact the dominant viewpoint in actual life, as indeed in many ways it still is, and as such it was an issue fraught with complexity and tension. As I have suggested, an important dimension of drama's structural importance in the Athenian *polis* was its unique freedom to reveal and analyze just such tensions. Surely the dramatists wanted to interpret the world for all Athenians, not just the men.

This function of the dramatic festivals would have been important particularly for the "others," that majority of Athenians whose only connection with the official *polis* was at festivals: working farmers, children, slaves, foreigners and (surely) women. For them, drama was an important source of information about, and analysis of, both the official and the unofficial discourses of the *polis*. The fact that the Assembly accommodated 6000 and the theater perhaps three times that many suggests that in the theater, for once, the citizen males may have been surrounded, perhaps even outnumbered, by the "others" on whose behalf they ran the *polis*. Indeed drama, especially comedy, typically casts such "others" in the role of critics of the executive *demos* and its leaders, as instruments of salvation or the restoration of social harmony when the leaders of the official city have disrupted things, just as in New Comedy it is

⁴⁷ See J. Henderson, "Older Women in Attic Old Comedy," *TAPA* 117 (1987) 105–29 (107, 128–29, citing Thuc. 8.1 on the unprecedented losses among the flower of Attic youth).

⁴⁸ Chapman (above, note 46) 21. For intellectual questioning of traditional gender-roles in this period see J. Vogt, *Von der Gleichwertigkeit der Geschlechter in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft der Griechen* (Wiesbaden 1960); for the Platonic attitude see J. Lucas, "Plato's Philosophy of Sex," in *Owls to Athens. Essays...for Sir Kenneth Dover*, ed. E. Craik (Oxford 1990) 223–31.

⁴⁹ See Zeitlin's article (above, note 3).

often a slave or an *hetaira* who restores order when the heads of an *oikos* have disrupted it.

In exposing and grappling with communal tensions, drama performed the cathartic and healing function that Perikles had in mind when he said (before an audience containing women) that public festivals provide "periodic mental relief from our toils" (Thuc. 2.38.1). Again, this is not to say that the women in drama were not created in accordance with male ideology or that the dramatists did not want the city's women to conform to male norms and interests. But if that was a goal the dramatists would surely have wanted the women to attend, and for just that reason they would have been careful to adapt their female portrayals to the changing realities of women's lives.

Why, then, would the notional audience have remained male? If there were female spectators and if dramatists composed with them in mind, why are they so rarely noticed and only once in extant comedy directly addressed, even when a Lysistrata or a Praxagora protests the condition of women? Dover suggests that "positive reactions of approval or disapproval by women in the presence of men would not have been welcomed,"⁵⁰ and that is very likely: the female spectators of Plautus' *Poenulus* are explicitly asked in the prologue to refrain from just such responses, and one thinks of Perikles' warning to the war-widows in his audience about public lamentation for their dead menfolk (Thuc. 2.45.2). But notions of proper female decorum are unlikely to be the whole explanation, for we may doubt whether anyone could have enforced such decorum or could realistically have expected self-restraint from slaves, *hetairas*, foreigners or (proverbially loud) market-women. Indeed some passages in Aristophanes virtually call out for partisan cheers from such women.⁵¹

A fuller explanation must include the possibility that the conventional invisibility of women in other public contexts held true of the theater as well. Even topical comedy and its characters adhered to the protocol, characteristic also of lawcourts, that a free man did not publicly name or explicitly allude to a living respectable woman not holding a public office.⁵² Like the lawcourts, which women could attend but not address, the theater was an assembly sponsored by and representing the official *polis*, so that in its civic aspect it was an assembly in which the women's world and the character of women might be portrayed and discussed, but only by men for a notional audience of men. Conventional opinion about women's judgment may also have played a part: taking the advice of a woman could be cited in court to prove an opponent's incompetence (Dem. 46.16, Isoc. 2.20). Since many cases of audience-address in comedy occur in passages that call attention to the quality of the play, or that

⁵⁰ See above, note 2.

⁵¹ E.g. *Wasps* 1388 ff. (the market-woman Myrtia insists on her civic rights) and *Lys.* 554 ff. (market-women, who serve as Lysistrata's "troops," list their complaints about the disturbances of the market-place that have resulted from the war).

⁵² See D. Schaps, "The Woman Least Mentioned: Etiquette and Women's Names," *CQ* 27 (1977) 323-30; A. H. Sommerstein, "The Naming of Women in Greek and Roman Comedy," *Quaderni di storia* 11 (1980) 393-418; Henderson (above, note 47) 106-8.

appeal for victory, and that therefore concern the civic standing of men,⁵³ perhaps the poets considered any appeal to women to be unmanly.⁵⁴

In these ways the theater was public and “official,” but at the same time it was festive, and as such required the presence of such “others” as women. There was probably a feeling that direct appeals or references to female spectators would be both offensive to their sense of propriety and threatening to the men of the *polis* in their capacity as official representatives and hosts. The utility of the dramatic festivals as an occasion for airing conflicts and anxieties that could not be publicly aired elsewhere depended on their being a safe, neutral ground: a time out of time. Thus the female spectators, if such there were, at once counted and didn’t count, a situation reflecting their overall role from the point of view of the *polis*, and reflecting also the dual role of the theater as exclusively political and inclusively festive.

⁵³ I am grateful to Ruth Scodel for this point.

⁵⁴ In regard to the competition itself we may note that, while the aulos-players depicted in theatrical vase-paintings are often female, the victory-lists name only male winners: another notional exclusion?