CHAPTER 8

Time, Cognition, and Attic Performance: Tracing a New Approach to Theatre History’s “Vexing Question”

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Abstract

The seemingly sudden appearance of Western theatre in Attic culture is one of the most controversial subjects in theatre studies, so pertinacious it has been dubbed “the vexing question.” Without recorded precedent, the remediation of material from a venerable mythic and bardic tradition into a highly articulated, labor-intensive, and expensive theatrical praxis is certainly enigmatic. It is timely to revisit the “vexing question” in light of several recent hypotheses from the brain sciences—neuroscience, cognitive science, cognitive sociology, and evolutionary psychology—in the hope of viewing the advent of Greek theatrical praxis afresh. In this paper, theatre’s historicized constructed nature as a mode of communication takes center stage, and we can make reasonable and sometimes provocative inferences about the period based on present research. My overarching question is this: What function/s might such a medium have fulfilled in the psychic economy of 5th-century Greek society?

Keywords


1 Introduction

The seemingly sudden appearance of Western theatre in Attic culture in the 6th century BCE is one of the most controversial subjects in theatre studies,¹

¹ For a review of the debates surrounding the advent of Greek theatre, see the introduction to Csapo and Miller, The Origins of Theater.
so compelling and pertinacious that it has been dubbed “the vexing question.”

In the attempt to understand theatre's emergence in what appears to be a matrix of ritual practices, we must first consider what theatrical praxis may have offered to the cultural moment that was desirable or essential. Fortunately, we possess significant indication of the subject matter the Athenian audience encountered in that over 30 plays by the greatest tragedians have endured. However, we have a paucity of reliable information regarding the modes and methods of the performances. In other words, while we can discern proclivities in the thematic material which made certain issues important ones to engage or foreground at the time, we are unsure of what may have been the experiential array of the productions themselves. For example, we have no theatrical masks or costumes from the period, no examples of the music to which the choral odes were sung, and no definite evidence for the nature of the choral dances. Finally, we are not even sure of the layout of the Theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the Acropolis where evidence suggests the Athenian theatrical festivals began. Indeed, our appraisal of Attic performance has sometimes been colored in traditional pedagogy and popular estimation by what might be termed an “apotheosis syndrome,” i.e., the notion that sublime plays constructed by supreme dramatists were produced in a transcendent moment of triumphant individuality and social cohesion. On the other end of the spectrum, studies of 6th- and 5th-century Greek performance have often been distracted by archaeological contestation such as disagreements regarding the true nature of the putative 5th-century post holes in the Theatre of Dionysus or the shape of the 5th-century orchestra there, even though the site is far too corrupted to discern such features responsibly. While there is always hope for future discoveries, we must come to terms with what we have and what we do not. Regarding Attic performance and certainly with regard to theatre’s origins, as classicist Sheila Murnaghan acknowledges, “[w]e will never be able to construct a reliable narrative out of our available evidence.”

With this situation in mind, I shall revisit the “vexing question” in light of several hypotheses from the brain sciences—neuroscience, cognitive science, cognitive sociology, and evolutionary psychology—in the hope of viewing the advent of Greek theatrical praxis with what Bertolt Brecht described as “astonished eye[s].” While some may regard this methodology as problematic in that we have no direct evidence of neurological functions from this period—sadly, we have no 5th-century Greek brains to examine—we can make reasonable and sometimes provocative inferences about the period based on present

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