It is widely accepted that a substantial portion of the citizens of Athens watched, enjoyed, and intellectually engaged with the dramatic performances at the Dionysia in the fifth century BC. It has also been contended that the theatre imparted or reinforced particular ethical and social values, and some recent work has sought to argue that the classical drama expressed a democratic political ethos. These latter claims depend upon the degree of certainty which can be attached to interpretations of the values held to be visible in the ancient dramatic texts. Because of this, they are to an extent necessarily speculative. Yet questions of audience size, structure and composition can be more securely resolved. These issues are certainly important if not fundamental to the claim that the theatre played an integral part in the formation or maintenance of civic values. Given the significance of the above claims in the context of a contemporary debate over the nature and possibilities of participatory democracy, a critical reappraisal of spectator numbers and status is warranted.

This paper will argue that the fifth-century audience was considerably smaller than generally thought. The figures which

1 For recent and consciously political interpretations, see especially P. Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory (Princeton, N.J. 1990) and C. Meier, The Political Art of Greek Tragedy (Cambridge 1993). The English translation of Meier's work was published by the specialized sociological publishing-house Polity Press.

are commonly given will be contended to be more appropriate to
the fourth century than the fifth. Partly on the basis of numbers,
and partly due to other indications of the status of spectators, it
will also be suggested that the fifth-century audience was more
elite than conventionally held. The paper aims to provoke some
reconsideration of the nature of the Dionysia and the extent to
which theatrical performance may be held to have impacted upon
Athenian society. It will discuss first, the seating capacity of the
theatre, second, the status and composition of the audience. On
the basis of these analyses it will be argued that there is
inadequate evidence to compel a strongly egalitarian
interpretation of the performance of works in the ancient theatre.

Estimates of audience numbers at the Dionysia have varied
considerably over time, but there has been a progressive reduction
in the number of spectators envisaged. George Grote, in his mid-
Victorian History of Greece, held that although the figure of
thirty thousand spectators mentioned in Plato's Symposium (175e)
should not be taken literally: ‘we cannot doubt that [the theatre]
was sufficiently capacious to [seat] most of the citizens' of Athens.3
A.W. Pickard-Cambridge regarded Plato's figure, which like
Grote he took Plato to have applied to the late-fifth century
theatre of Dionysus, as a 'great exaggeration', but suggested that
'many may have stood' outside the seating area. He calculated a
maximum seated capacity of seventeen thousand persons in the
fourth-century theatre at an allowance of sixteen inches per
person, but owned that fourteen thousand was generally regarded
as a more reliable figure.4

Yet while it is conceivable that a great crowd may have stood
to watch a famous actor perform in a particular play, as Plato’s

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141 with n. 2. V. Ehrenberg, The People of Aristophanes (2nd edn., Oxford
1951) thought that an emendation to Aristophanes to yield a figure of 13,000
was plausible, but stated that the MSS readings are difficult (28 with n. 3).
dialogue implies, it is implausible that some half of thirty thousand persons stood elbow to elbow outside the seating area all day at a five-day festival in either century. It may further be noted that Athenaeus 217a-b holds with respect to the Platonic Symposium that Agathon's victory occurred in 417/6 at the Lenaea. Because the Lenaea was celebrated in its own sanctuary,\(^5\) Plato's figure should not be associated with the theatre of Dionysus at all. It therefore remains an important question as to how many persons the latter theatre seated in its greatest era.

Substantial reconstruction of the theatre of Dionysus was undertaken, probably in stages, throughout the whole of the second half of the fifth century.\(^6\) The significant part of the reconstruction for present purposes is that which occurred after the building of the Odeum, which was completed ca. 443. The work undertaken at this time defined the shape and capacity of the auditorium as it was used in the heyday of the Athenian δεμοκρατία. The orchestra was moved northward, towards the Acropolis, and the auditorium was re-banked with a steeper slope.\(^7\) Its seats were predominantly comprised of wooden benches and were probably permanent.\(^8\) The extant stone auditorium postdated the fifth century, and work on it continued over the course of the fourth.\(^9\) Consequently it is necessary to work back

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6 Pickard-Cambridge, Theatre of Dionysus 17, 135.

7 Pickard-Cambridge, Theatre of Dionysus 15, 265.


from the later structure to estimate the audience capacity of the earlier phases.

The stone seats of the fourth-century theatre are one Greek foot (about thirteen inches) deep and the same in height. As spectators brought their own cushions, Pickard-Cambridge allowed a total seat height of fifteen inches, which he described as 'somewhat cramping for a long day's sitting'.\textsuperscript{10} The seats have a recess behind them to accommodate the feet of the spectator to the rear. The front of each seat thus has a slight overhang which permits 'more rows of seats into the available space than could have been placed there if each seat had had a perpendicular front'. It has been calculated that the construction of overhang seating permitted seventy-eight rows of seats to be built in the stone theatre, rather than sixty-nine which would otherwise have been the maximum possible.\textsuperscript{11} It is therefore reasonable to take sixty-nine rows of seats to be the most that the fifth-century theatre could have contained if it had occupied the same ground-space as its fourth-century descendant. This constitutes a lesser seating capacity of approximately eleven and a half percent.

Pickard-Cambridge's seating allowance of sixteen inches per person was based on the allocation of armless seating in a London theatre.\textsuperscript{12} This seating is sold for performances which would rarely exceed two and a half hours' duration, and as such is a wholly unreliable guide to minimal seating requirements for an all-day, outdoor spectacle. Stadium seating, on the other hand, is sold to this end, and seating information from a major, long-established stadium venue permits doubt to be cast on the validity of Pickard-Cambridge's estimate of minimum seating

\textsuperscript{10} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Theatre of Dionysus} 140; cf. \textit{Festivals} 272.

\textsuperscript{11} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Theatre of Dionysus} 140.

\textsuperscript{12} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Theatre of Dionysus} 140-1 and n. 1. This privileged the London theatre allowance of 16\textquoteright\textquoteright over the London County Council requirement of 18\textquoteright\textquoteright given in the same note.
requirements. Reserved seating on wooden bench seats for all-day events at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Australia, is sold at an allowance of eighteen inches per person. This is uncomfortably crowded, and in identically constructed but non-reserved seating areas, people will not squeeze up to that extent. The non-reserved sections consequently accommodate only about three-quarters of that number.\textsuperscript{13}

There is good reason to doubt that seated Athenian spectators were jammed together. \textit{Prohedria} or honorific front-row seating was given to ‘certain priests, ... the archons, and (at least in the course of time) ... the generals’.\textsuperscript{14} Behind this, in the body of the auditorium, some allowance should be made for extra elbow-room for state and cult officials (including the Council of 500 and their attendants) and visiting envoys, all these being attested categories of spectators.\textsuperscript{15} Another group of elite spectators which seems to have been overlooked by all commentary but for which it is reasonable to make allowance is members of the Areopagus council. All of the above categories of persons, as dignitaries, most

\textsuperscript{13} This information about MCG seating was obtained from its ticket office.

\textsuperscript{14} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Festivals} 268. The generals are said to have judged tragic performance as early as Cimon’s day (Plut. \textit{Cim.} 8.7-8).

\textsuperscript{15} A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{The Dramatic Festivals of Athens} (2nd edn. Oxford 1968) 268-9. For the style with which Alcibiades entered the theatre, see Athenaeus 534c (quoted below in this paper). Bouleutic seating is inscriptionally attested and confirmed by literary references (Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Theatre of Dionysus} 135, cf. 20). Ehrenberg, \textit{People} 27 accepted the presence of some ‘few hundreds’ of foreign allies, ambassadors and metics. It is undisputed that boys and \textit{epheboi} sat in the audience (Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Festivals} 263; J.J. Winkler, ‘The Ephebes’ Song: \textit{Tragoidia} and \textit{Polis},’ in J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin [edd.], \textit{Nothing to Do with Dionysos?} [Princeton, N.J. 1990] 38). One should probably number the families of skilled tragic and comic actors in the audience as ‘theatrical involvement tended to run in families over two to three generations’ (J.R. Green, \textit{Theatre in Ancient Greek Society} [London and New York 1994] 13), although this would not amount to a large number of persons. In the fourth century, another five hundred places might have been reserved for the \textit{nomophylakes} (Philocharus \textit{FGrH} 328 F 64b; cf. Csapo and Slater, \textit{Context} 289, 298).
likely occupied a comfortably wide seating space. As noted above, a realistic seating allowance on bench seating for an all-day spectacle is more like two feet per person. In the following analysis, I shall posit an overall average of twenty-two inches per person as a working figure.

On Pickard-Cambridge’s figures, the fourth-century auditorium held a maximum of seventeen thousand persons at sixteen inches per head, calculation from which yields 272,000 inches of seating. This, divided by twenty-two inches per person, permits 12,364 seated patrons. Because overhang seating did not exist in the fifth-century auditorium, its seating capacity was argued to have been eleven and a half percent smaller than that of the later fourth century, given that it had occupied the same ground space. If that percentage is deducted from the more realistic fourth-century audience capacity of 12,364 persons given above, there would have been approximately 10,940 seating places in the fifth-century theatre. This is still an impressive figure, but it is substantially lower than that envisaged by most scholars. It would also be compatible with Christian Meier’s statement that given the acoustics even of the fourth-century theatre at Athens, ‘the plays can have been properly comprehensible for ten thousand spectators at most’.

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17 At the cramped seating allowance of eighteen inches per head, as per Pickard-Cambridge’s cited London County Council regulations (Pickard-Cambridge, *Theatre of Dionysus* 141 n.1) and the MCC reserved seating allocation, 15,111 persons could have been seated in the fourth-century theatre, and 13,367 in that of the fifth century given that the auditorium occupied the same ground space.

18 Meier, *Political Art* 59. Pickard-Cambridge observed that ‘there is plenty of evidence for the noisiness of Athenian audiences’ (*Festivals* 272f.), which sits ill with the kind of dedicated and serious listening envisaged by Meier.
However, the fifth-century auditorium occupied substantially less ground space than did the later stone theatre. A public road some fifteen feet wide had crossed the fifth-century theatre about forty-six and a half feet above the level of the Lycurgan orchestra. The seating area which was constructed above what later became a passageway across the auditorium belonged to the fourth-century works and was not a part of the fifth-century theatre.\(^{19}\) John Travlos' plan of the likely shape of the fifth-century theatre postulated a total of nineteen rows of seats, in a projected auditorium radius of approximately sixteen metres. His accompanying plan of the fourth-century theatre shows thirty-six rows of seats in what has become a substantially enlarged lower auditorium with a radius of approximately twenty-nine metres, and part of the second, upper seating section, the rows of which are of greater circumference than those below them.\(^{20}\) The lower seating area of the fourth-century theatre alone thus held no more than half of the total fourth-century audience.

In other words, if Travlos' plan of the fifth-century auditorium is trustworthy, it could not possibly have seated more than a third of the later total fourth-century capacity. If the estimated seating requirements advanced above are accepted as realistic, it would follow that the Periclean auditorium seated a maximum of some 3,700 persons. This is a radical contrast with the current view, but I have seen no challenge to Travlos' projections, and therefore contend that the postulation is in line with the available evidence. This is not to deny that more may have stood somewhere outside the seating area, or watched from the Acropolis.\(^{21}\) But it is to question that many more than 3,700 persons


\(^{20}\) J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (London 1971) 540 fig. 677 (II); 541 fig. 678.

\(^{21}\) See the view of the theatre from the Acropolis in Wycherley, *Stones* 214 plate 62, and of the top of the Acropolis wall from the orchestra in Travlos, *Dictionary* 544 plate 681.
were fully paid and seated patrons of plays staged at the fifth-century Athenian Dionysia.\textsuperscript{22}

The audience’s composition and status will now be reviewed, and it will be suggested that there is reason to doubt propositions to the effect that the performances of classical drama were necessarily linked with an egalitarian civic ideology. A minimum of 1,200 persons were required for the performance of dithyramb, tragedy and comedy during the Dionysia.\textsuperscript{23} Did these comprise a part of the audience at times when they were not performing? Given that the structure was one of inter-tribal competition, it may be that they did. If this is right, the number of non-participant spectators would have been significantly lower. It is passionately disputed whether women, who did not participate in magistracies, council, courts or assemblies, nevertheless occupied space in the fifth-century theatre. As Simon Goldhill observed, if ‘citizen women did ... sit in the theatre, watch plays, be watched, walk home—much modern writing on the role of women in the oikos and polis would need a new emphasis’.\textsuperscript{24} Although it has become common to deny that women had any substantive existence in the discourse of Athenian political life,\textsuperscript{25} a number of sources

\textsuperscript{22} At the cramped seating allowance of eighteen inches per person (see n. 17 above), the fifth-century theatre could have seated a maximum of 4,500 persons. In making these estimates I have erred to the generous by rounding upwards to the nearest whole hundred.

\textsuperscript{23} Green, Theatre 9-10. The dithyrambic competition was contested between two choruses of fifty, one each of boys and men, from each of the ten tribes. Each comedy had a chorus of twenty-four (a total of one hundred and twenty); a minimum of forty-five actors would have been required for the tragedies, although Green noted that if each tragedy and satyr-play had different chorusesmen, one hundred and eighty actors could have been involved, along with other production workers.


(collected by Podlecki\textsuperscript{26}) have been held to support the view that women did occupy seats in the classical auditorium.

Goldhill disputed that any of the evidence compelled the view that women did attend the theatre.\textsuperscript{27} He argued cogently that most of the items do not explicitly refer to women being present in the tragic or comic audience. But he did not review all of the evidence, and did not address five sources which provide strongly suggestive evidence for the presence of women. These are (1) \textit{Vita Aesch.} 9, that ‘in the performance of the \textit{Eumenides} ... children fainted and miscarriages occurred’; (2) Athenaeus 534c, that ‘whenever as choregus Alcibiades led the procession into the theatre in his purple cloak, he was the object of admiration of not only the men but the women’; (3) Alciphron \textit{Ep.} 2.3.10, that Alciphron had won ivy-crowns at the Dionysia while his mistress ‘seated in the theatre, looks on’; (4) Plut. \textit{Phoc.} 19, that an actor’s posturing over the lack of attendants for his role as a queen would be ‘the corruption of our women’, whereas the prominent general Phocion’s wife goes out with only one maid; and (5) schol. Ar. \textit{Eccl.} 22, that one Phyromachos mentioned in that play had ‘introduced legislation assigning separate seats to women and men and separating prostitutes from free women’.\textsuperscript{28} (Women’s seats in the theatre of Dionysus are inscriptionally attested in the Roman period.\textsuperscript{29}) It is true that all these are late sources, and that they


\textsuperscript{27} Goldhill claimed neutrality in this debate, but admitted a ‘slant’ to his views (‘Representing Democracy’ 368), which were in turn shaped by his belief that to be in the audience at the Dionysia was to participate ‘in a fundamental political act’ of the Athenian \textit{demokratia} (352).

\textsuperscript{28} The first four are collected in Podlecki, ‘Testimonia’ as group F; schol. \textit{Eccl.} 22 is cited within group H at 40 n. 25, where Podlecki states that it does not permit conclusions about women seated in special sections. Although regarded as unreliable (without argument) by Pickard-Cambridge (\textit{Festivals} 265), it does constitute evidence for women’s presence, if not for seating arrangements (Csapo and Slater, \textit{Context} 300 no. 155).

\textsuperscript{29} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Festivals} 265.
do not prove the presence of women at the classical Dionysia. But they are strongly suggestive, and certainly permit that the presence of women cannot be ruled out.

The fact that inter-tribal competition formed a principal focus for events may explain the strong emphasis on men (to the neglect of women) in comic exchanges. Yet there is one crucial piece of evidence, Ar. Peace 963-6, which does appear to attest the presence of women in the fifth-century theatre. The text is as follows:

Trygaeus. Throw the barley (krithai) to the audience.  
Sl. There goes.  
Tr. Have you finished?  
Sl. Yes, by Hermes. There’s not one man of the audience who doesn’t have barley/a penis (krithe).  
Tr. But the women haven’t got any.  
Sl. But come night, their husbands will give it to them.

This passage has been much disputed. Goldhill rejected it as compelling evidence for the presence of women, but the case rests upon his dismissal of a highly implausible suggestion that women were seated too far back in the theatre to catch barley thrown from the stage. Yet Aristophanes’ joke does not depend upon women physically catching seeds, but results solely from word play. The text refers first to the men in the audience, and secondly to ‘the women’, who are clearly understood to be present.

There is further support for the presence of women in Aristophanes fr. 487 K-A (472 Kock), in which a character refers to ‘the wine-flask ... which I brought along so that I could have a fellow spectatoress’. The line implies that the speaker is female, and the fragment comes from a play entitled Skenas Katalambanousai. It is therefore reasonable to take the character as referring to herself as present in a theatrical audience. The late testimony presented above, together with the lines from Aristophanes, makes it highly likely that women should be

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30 Goldhill, ‘Representing Democracy’ 348.
numbered amongst the fifth-century audience.\textsuperscript{31} Given this likelihood, the number of adult male citizens envisaged in the fifth-century auditorium stands to be further reduced.\textsuperscript{32}

The status of the audience deserves consideration. Most of the spectators had to pay for their own seats. Although theoretic or festival distributions are held by some late sources to have been made by Pericles, Peter Rhodes observed a 'striking lack of contemporary confirmation', and argued against the existence of any theoretic distribution before the 350s.\textsuperscript{33} If the stories of Pericles are true, they may attest no more than the buying of personal influence by Pericles, and are not evidence of a distribution of theoretic monies by the state. There was no connection between Kleophon's diobelia (\textit{[Arist.]} \textit{Ath. Pol.} 28.3) and the theatre.\textsuperscript{34} In any event, such a distribution would not have solved the problem of access to the theatre: as Csapo and Slater have pointed out, 'the number of male citizens alone was at least twice the [fourth-century] theatre's seating capacity'.\textsuperscript{35} It would seem, then, that access to seats in the fifth-century theatre was both severely

\textsuperscript{31} For further argument for the presence of women, see J. Henderson, 'Women and the Athenian Dramatic Festivals', \textit{TAPA} 121 (1991) 133-47. Henderson wrote in conclusion that '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 \textit{kyrios} had no objection' (144).

\textsuperscript{32} Csapo and Slater concluded unequivocally that 'the testimony of ancient authors shows clearly that women (and boys) were present in the audience. The contrary argument rests mainly upon the comic poets' habit of addressing the audience as "gentlemen." This fails to distinguish physical from ideological exclusion' (Context 286).

\textsuperscript{33} P.J. Rhodes, \textit{A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaiion Politeia} (Oxford 1981) 514.

\textsuperscript{34} Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Festivals} 266-7.

\textsuperscript{35} Csapo and Slater, \textit{Context} 288.
limited in quantity and limited principally to those who paid their own way.\textsuperscript{36}

Lastly, J.R. Green has observed that ‘despite the time of the year chosen, when there was little to be done in the fields, there also had to be enough surplus of people in the family economy to have some stay behind to look after the property or the animals while others took the equivalent of a week at a time to attend the theatre’.\textsuperscript{37} Along with this might be noted, after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 (from which date the bulk of the surviving fifth-century drama was produced), the expense of accommodation and food in a city already extremely crowded with refugees from the countryside (Thuc. 2.14.1, 17.1). In sum, against a widespread enthusiasm for an extraordinary level of cultivation thought to have been achieved by the average Athenian in the fifth century, it is possible to see its Dionysia as primarily an affair for an urban elite, with an inter-tribal and military focus.\textsuperscript{38}

Meier observed that ‘theatre productions and competitions are also recorded as early as the fifth century in Piraeus, Eleusis and a series of other communities in Attica’. He argued from Hdt. 6.21.2, in which the Athenians banned the acting of Phrynichus’ \textit{Fall of Miletus} (ca. 492), that ‘it was a regular, or at least occasional,

\textsuperscript{36} In the fourth century at least, theatre seats were sold by lessees who contracted to care for the theatre (Pickard-Cambridge, \textit{Festivals} 266, cf. 267). Csapo and Slater adduced \textit{IG II²} 1176+ of ca. 324/3, which attests the leasing of the theatre in Piraeus, stipulates the price of seats, and prescribes free admission to those granted \textit{prohedria} (Context 288).

\textsuperscript{37} Green, \textit{Theatre} 15.

\textsuperscript{38} Winkler argued that the dramatic choruses were ‘an aesthetically elevated version of close-order drill’ (‘Ephebes’ Song’ 22), and that the Dionysia was above all an event focussed on the \textit{epheboi}, young men in military training (37). I have no objection to this interpretation, but it is worth noting Victor Ehrenberg’s observation that the \textit{ephebeia} or military training of the young men was a common and traditional feature of Greek states (\textit{From Solon to Socrates}, 2nd edn. [London 1973] 97). It follows that peculiarly democratic connotations should not be read into it.
practice to transfer the plays to various local theatres' such that 'a far greater number got to see the tragedies than the capacity of the theatre [of Dionysus]'\(^3\).\(^9\) Apart from the fact that there is a very great difference between a 'regular' and an 'occasional' practice, Meier relied entirely upon Herodotus for the hypothesis that plays had a wide local circulation throughout most of the fifth century. This is a weight which that statement cannot bear. Further, local theatres were also leased to contractors who, one might suspect, were primarily concerned with seating paying patrons.\(^4\)\(^0\)

In conclusion, there is reason to doubt that fifth-century dramatic audiences comprised a major portion of the citizenry, that they were exclusively male, that they were egalitarian in composition, or that they were substantially composed of the poor. On the contrary, there is reason to think that the audience of the greatest period of Attic drama encompassed only a fraction of the polis, and comprised spectators of mixed gender predominantly from the Attic elite. Such a suggestion is diametrically opposed to the prevalent view of the Athenian Dionysia, but does not appear to be incompatible with what may be deduced about the development of the classical auditorium and the sociology of the audience. If it has merit, it may also lead to some reconsideration

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\(^3\) Meier, *Political Art* 61.

of the values which might be held to have been expressed in the ancient dramatic texts.\footnote{41}

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\footnote{41 It is curious that the further development of the Athenian democracy from the fifth into the fourth century does not appear to have been accompanied by a continuing broad and uplifting cultural advance in the field of theatre. Green, \textit{Theatre} 49-50, wrote of this period that 'there was no longer any interest in ... plays which, like those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and earlier Euripides, were concerned with the large questions' which have been taken by scholars as central to the construction of the classical drama and to a related political discourse.}