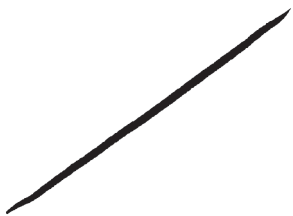


CONCEPT 2(29)/2024

INSULARITY AND BEING AN ISLANDER IN ANCIENT GREEK THEATRICAL LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article analyses the ways in which the theme of “insularity” is portrayed in ancient Greek drama and the meaning that is given to the attribute of being an islander in these theatrical works. The overview starts from a more general approach of Greek literature, from the example of Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, and the modern poem of *Ithaka*, by K.P. Kavafis, then delves into the works of Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. The theme of “insularity” is present, in the analyzed works, in various opposing ways. In some cases, as a form of isolation from society, going as far as to be considered a form of imprisonment, as is the case with the play *The Trojan Women* by Euripides or, at the other end of the spectrum, a safe haven in *The Birds* by Aristophanes. The characteristic of being an islander and the theme of “insularity” are not limited to the island location of the play’s action. They can appear in other geographical locations like the peninsula, or more abstract places like Hades and the “island in the sky”, all of them being characterized by common defining elements.

Keywords: island, insularity, ancient Greek drama, desire, isolation, utopia, otherness.

How to cite: Peltekis, A. (2024) “Insularity and Being an islander in Ancient Greek Theatrical literature”, *Concept* 2(29), pp. 48-57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37130/2jgq7f87>

Introduction. Islands beyond the ancient world horizon

Greece is a country which is mostly surrounded by sea, with a very large number of islands and island networks. It is therefore natural, if not inevitable, that “insularity”, in all its manifestations, exerts a significant influence on the everyday life, as well as on the set of cultural and domestic elements that, as a natural consequence, are reflected in Greek literature, both ancient and modern.

In order to have a more holistic point of view about the concept of „insularity” in the literature of ancient Greece, it is necessary to make a small introductory description of ancient Greek literature and the perception that the authors have on “insularity”.

The ancient Greeks were not aware of the islands beyond their world horizon, as their geographic knowledge was limited to the areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Nevertheless, there were some Greek authors who wrote about islands beyond these regions, often portraying them in similar ways to the islands of the known world.

In one such case, in the works of Homer, there are references to islands beyond the Mediterranean, such as the “Island of the Blessed” or “Erytheia”, which was said to be located somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. These islands were often depicted as places of paradise or utopias, where the inhabitants lived in a state of perfect happiness and contentment. *The Odyssey* by Homer (see 2006 translation by Robert Fagles) – while not a theatrical work, features several

islands beyond the Greek horizon. For example, the island of Circe is depicted as a magical and exotic place, where the hero, Odysseus, encounters a powerful sorceress who transforms his men into swine. Similarly, the island of the Cyclops is portrayed as a frightening and dangerous place, inhabited by giant one-eyed monsters who pose a grave threat to Odysseus and his crew.

“The island”, in a significant number of cases, in ancient and Modern Greek literature, is usually given the meaning of the dream, the hope, the home and the desire. The common theme, for example in *The Odyssey*, is that Odysseus and his crew sail from island to island in search of their homeland, the main purpose being to arrive there, as their desired destination. We face the same theme from another point of view, almost 3000 years later, in the poem *Ithaka* by K.P. Kavafis (2016), where the meaning of the island as a destination is not the main purpose of the itinerary, but arriving there is still the sought-after target. The island is still the desired place, the home.

In another way, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote about the island of Thule, which was said to be located somewhere in the far north. According to Herodotus, Thule was a land of perpetual darkness, where the sun never rose during the winter months. This portrayal of Thule as a distant and inhospitable place was common in ancient Greek literature. We could easily compare this strange island with the dystopian land of Hades where the great play *Frogs* by Aristophanes is taking place.

While the ancient Greeks did not have a comprehensive understanding of the world beyond their horizon, they still imagined these far-off lands and islands as remote and exotic places, often imbued with a sense of mystery and wonder. In many cases, islands in ancient Greek literature served as powerful symbols for otherness, difference, and the unknown. Many of the islands portrayed were said to be inhabited by mythical creatures, such as the Sirens. These creatures were often used as metaphors for the dangers and temptations that sailors faced in the open sea. As a result, they were sometimes used as political metaphors and were also associated with myths and legends, describing places of danger, isolation, and enchantment that captured the imagination of audiences for generations.

“The Islands” were also used to explore philosophical and ethical themes. In *The Republic* by Plato (2022), the island of Atlantis is used as a metaphor for an ideal society, where the citizens live in harmony and prosperity. Similarly, in *The Symposium*, the philosopher Diotima (Plato, 2003) describes love as a journey to a distant island, where one can find true beauty and wisdom.

Besides the literary contexts, from a social point of view, the sea and maritime culture have been very important since ancient times. The sea was part of daily life, and many Greeks were skilled sailors and fishermen. Islands were

often seen as remote outposts in the vast expanse of the sea and were associated with seafaring cultures and traditions.

Entering the world of ancient Greek drama, we could detect some examples of islands beyond the ancient Greek horizon that are mentioned in Greek theatrical works. This fact advances the idea that “insularity”, or the state of being an islander, is a theme that appears in several ancient Greek dramas.

The plays. Drama and “insularity”

As to have a proper view of the ways that the theme of “insularity” appears in the works of ancient playwrights, we will go, in this chapter, through nine examples, six tragedies and three comedies.

1. *Philoctetes* by Sophocles (1970): The play centers around the character of Philoctetes, a skilled archer who was abandoned on the island of Lemnos by the Greek army on their way to Troy. Insularity in this play is emphasized by the hero’s decision to be physically separated from the other characters, who are fighting on the mainland. Philoctetes is portrayed as a lonely and isolated figure, living a life of suffering and pain on the remote island, when his companions decide to abandon him in the wasteland of Lemnos, since he was bitten by a venomous snake, making him scream constantly and giving off a foul smell from his wound. In this situation, being an islander is portrayed as something embarrassing and ostracizing, the island receiving the role of a prison, of forced isolation and incarceration. This point of view differs significantly in comparison with the importance that is given to being an islander in real life, a state of being that is usually seen as a positive attribute.
2. In similar terms, we face the theme of “insularity” in *The Cyclops* by Euripides (1995): This play is based on the myth of Odysseus and his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus. Polyphemus is portrayed as a brutal and uncivilized creature, living in a cave on a remote island. The “Insularity” is also emphasized by his isolation from other humans and his lack of knowledge regarding their customs and ways of life. The only difference here, in relation with the previous example, is that the Cyclops is not a human being, but a creature belonging in the field of imagination.
3. *Helen* by Euripides (2008): The play is based on the myth of Helen of Troy, who is famously associated with the Trojan War and the city of Troy, located on the coast of Asia Minor. In this play, Helen is revealed to be living on the island of Pharos, where she has been stranded for many years. This is-

land off the coast of Egypt is portrayed as a distant and exotic place, where the mythical character of Helen has been taken captive by the Egyptian king. The island is also home to a powerful sorceress, who helps Helen and her husband Menelaus escape from the king's clutches. "Insularity" in this case has a particular meaning. Helen's physical separation from her homeland and her isolation on the remote island is a way to protect her from danger and make her the cause of someone else's misery. Being an islander in this play means protection and, in a way, positive isolation.

4. *The Trojan Women* by Euripides (1999): In this play, the women of Troy are taken captive by the Greeks and forced to leave their homeland behind. They are portrayed as being exiled to a distant land or island, where they are cut off from their families and their way of life. The island or a coastal region of Phthia, for example, represents a place of isolation and despair, where the women are forced to confront the harsh reality of their situation. Here, we face again a scene of imprisonment in a place which represents insularity. Being islanders for the Trojan women is the same as if they were prisoners.
5. *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides (2003): In this play, the peninsula of Tauris is depicted as a remote and barbaric place, where Iphigenia has been taken captive by the Scythians. The place is also the site of a temple to the goddess Artemis, where human sacrifices are carried out. The play follows the efforts of Iphigenia's father, Agamemnon, to rescue her from this hostile and inhospitable place. We can interpret the symbol of the peninsula similarly to that of the island, by taking into consideration the common characteristics of the two, by analyzing, in this case, the problem of "insularity", or, as an extension, of "peninsularity", a state of being similar to that of being an islander.
6. Even in *Medea* by Euripides (1995) we could find some insularity elements. The title character, Medea, is a sorceress from the island of Colchis, more precisely a peninsula somewhere in today's Georgia. Her origins give her a different perspective on life and love, which ultimately leads her to commit terrible acts of revenge against her husband and his new wife. When Jason took her away from her family and country and brought her into the island of the Phaeacians, they both lived the insular way of life for a while, until they arrived in the society of Corinth, where the play is set. "Insularity" here is depicted as a hosting place which is safe and where islanders are hospitable and helpful.

Islands are also mentioned in two of Aristophanes' comedies, more as utopian than real places:

1. *The Birds* by Aristophanes (2017): This play is set in an imaginary place, a so called "island in the sky", created by the birds in order to escape the meddling of the gods and humans. The "island" here is depicted as a utopia, where the birds live in peace and harmony, free from the chaos of the mortal world below. "Insularity", in this case, is depicted as a "purgatory" of everyday life.
2. *The Frogs* by Aristophanes (2017): This play is set in Hades, the underworld of Greek mythology. While not an island in the traditional sense, Hades is often depicted as a remote and inaccessible place, cut off from the mortal world. The play follows the god Dionysus as he travels to the underworld in search of a great poet, encountering a few famous Greek heroes and mythical creatures along the way.
3. *The Archanians (Archanes)* again by Aristophanes (1998): In this work it is mentioned that the Spartans claimed Aegina in order to deprive the Athenians of their poet, i.e. Aristophanes, and according to a source, the latter had estates on the island and often went there to isolate himself and write his works.

Characteristics of insularity in the plays

The islands portrayed in ancient Greek plays and literature, as we saw in the previous chapters, were often associated with a sense of otherness and difference. They were seen as places that were distant, remote, and sometimes difficult to access, with their own unique qualities, cultures, customs, and traditions. Here are some additional observations regarding the already described plays:

- a) Many of the islands portrayed in Greek literature were associated with danger and risk. For example, the island of the Cyclops in *The Odyssey* is portrayed as a place of great peril, where Odysseus and his crew are at risk of being devoured by the one-eyed monster who inhabits the island.
- b) Islands were also used as symbols of isolation and confinement. Characters who were exiled to islands were cut off from their families and their communities and forced to confront their own inner demons. In *The Trojan Women* (1999), for example, some of the women of Troy are taken captive and exiled to a distant island (or peninsula), where they are forced to confront the harsh reality of their situation, as we saw above. "Insularity" is used as a literary device to emphasize the isolation and uniqueness of the characters involved. It also serves to highlight the differences between island and mainland cultures, and to explore the themes of exile, alienation, and loneliness.

From another perspective, insularity and being an islander, were often portrayed as unique characteristics that set certain characters apart from others. In this category we have, for example, *Ion* by Euripides (1999). In this play, the island of Delos is depicted as a sacred place, where the god Apollo is said to have been born. The island called “Ortygia” was an island drifting on the waves, until Zeus stabilized it after Apollo’s birth. Ortygia was called Delos, because that is where the god Apollo was revealed (became *delos* i.e. manifest). The island is also the site of an annual festival, where Athenian women gather to offer gifts and sacrifices to the god. In this play “insularity” has a positive meaning. It is a place where someone could find a refuge, a warm, safe and hospitable place.

Islands were, most of the times, seen as isolated and remote, this being reflected in the way the island as a place or islanders were portrayed in plays. As we already saw, this is the case for the character of Philoctetes in Sophocles’ play *Philoctetes* (1970), who is stranded on the island of Lemnos for ten years after being bitten by a snake. Another example is that of Medea in Euripides’ play *Medea* (1995), who is portrayed as exotic and foreign compared to the other characters in the play. Her origins give her a different perspective on life and love, which ultimately leads her to commit terrible acts of revenge against her husband and his new wife.

In both examples, the insularity of the characters appears as a defining characteristic that sets them apart from the other characters in the play. This can be seen as a reflection of the ancient Greek view of the islands, as remote and isolated places, inhabited by people who were different from those on the mainland.

Additionally, there are a few more examples of how insularity is portrayed in ancient Greek dramas which were inspired by Greek mythology and, of course, Homer and his epic poem, in which Odysseus encounters numerous obstacles, including the one-eyed giant Polyphemus, the sorceress Circe, and the sea monster Scylla. These characters are all portrayed as living on remote islands, far removed from the mainland and its inhabitants with a particular kind of “insularity” that is dependent on their distance from human society and their isolation from the customs and values of civilized life.

In other cases, islands were used to explore themes of gender and sexuality. In *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes (2022) for example, the women of Athens and Sparta go on a sex strike to protest against the war waged by their husbands, and they retreat to the nearby island of Salamis to carry out their plan. The island becomes a space of deliberation and freedom where the women can assert their power and challenge the traditional gender roles of ancient Greece. This context is also used to explore themes of colonialism and imperialism.

In *The Bacchae* by Euripides (2003), the god Dionysus is associated with the island of Naxos, which is said to have been conquered by the Athenians. The play can be seen as a commentary on the political and cultural tensions between Athens and its colonies. In other circumstances it can be seen as an exploration of themes such as exile and displacement.

Conclusion

Islands played a significant role in ancient Greek literature, as they were used to explore a wide range of themes and ideas, from gender and sexuality to politics and power, from exile and displacement to transformation and change. They continue to captivate readers and audiences today, serving as powerful symbols of adventure, danger, and the unknown.

In all these plays, “insularity” is used to create a sense of otherness or difference between the characters and their surroundings. It serves to highlight the ways in which isolation and separation can lead to dislocation, loneliness, and even madness. At the same time, insularity can also create the conditions for new forms of community and culture to emerge, as people adapt to their new environments and form new relationships with one another.

Finally, the theme of “insularity” is also used in ancient Greek dramas to explore a wide range of issues, including alienation and isolation, cultural differences, exile, and the creation of new communities. Many of these plays also use “insularity” as a way to explore the theme of exile. Characters that are separated from their homes and communities can experience profound feelings of loss and separation.

Despite the challenges brought forth by the theme of “insularity”, many of these plays also show how new communities can emerge in isolated environments. Characters that are cut off from the larger society may form new relationships and alliances with one another, based on shared experiences and values.

In summary, by emphasizing the unique characteristics of island life, ancient Greek theatre plays, and ancient Greek literature offer a rich and nuanced portrayal of the human experience in all its complexity.

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