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## American Communist Idealism in George Cram Cook's *The Athenian Women* (1918)

The distinctive history of ancient drama in pro-Soviet, Communist, Marxist, and workers' theatres outside the Soviet Union and the "Eastern Bloc" is identifiable almost immediately after the Russian revolution of 1917. In the USA it was launched by *The Athenian Women*, written by the American George Cram Cook, with input from his long-term lover, whom he had recently married, the novelist Susan Glaspell.<sup>1</sup> *The Athenian Women* is a serious, substantial three-act drama set in Periclean Athens, but drawing on Aristophanes' "women" plays produced from 411 onwards, *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae*. Although it is a new work, *The Athenian Women* also engages with Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war, and with the figure of Socrates as portrayed in both Plato and Xenophon. According to Glaspell, when Cook was writing the play during the summer of 1917, he was filtering the daily news from Europe through the lens of Thucydides, often quoting the historian's dictum that "in all human probability these things will happen again".<sup>2</sup> The play states its socialist and feminist politics in the mouths of the two main revolutionary characters, Lysicles and Aspasia respectively. Although the play was not particularly successful, its 1918 production by the Provincetown Players had an indirect impact on the future directions taken by progressive and political theatre in the USA, especially through the subsequent dramas of Glaspell and the soon-to-be-world-famous playwright she and Cook mentored, Eugene O'Neill.<sup>3</sup>

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1 On Glaspell's fiction cf. Martha C. Carpentier, *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

2 S. Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005, originally published London: E. Benn Ltd. 1926), 267; and Thucydides 1.22.

3 The three standard histories of the company all focus mainly on the period between 1919 and 1922, rather than the early years 1915 to spring 1918, when *The Athenian Women* was produced: Edna Kenton's manuscript (published 1997), which is the only account by an original member of the group, and Helen Deutsch and Stella Hanau, *The Provincetown: A Story of the Theatre* (New

The context in which the play was performed was the exceptional “cultural ferment” of Greenwich Village in the first two decades of the 20th century. “It was a time when everything was new and anything was possible, even contrary purposes.”<sup>4</sup> The New York bohemian scene is described in Glaspell’s 1915 novel, *Fidelity*: “There were new poets in the world; there were bold new thinkers; there was an amazing new art; science was reinterpreting the world and workers and women were setting themselves free. Everywhere the old pattern was being shot through with new ideas”<sup>5</sup>

Glaspell is always difficult to write about as a theatre writer, however, because her major contributions to the Provincetown Players have been obscured by the reputations of both Cook (usually known as “Jig,” although I refer to him throughout this article as Cook) and O’Neill. It is impossible to be sure of the extent of Glaspell’s contribution to the text of *The Athenian Women*. She certainly helped shape the dialogue and some scenes;<sup>6</sup> I have previously explored this issue in the *Oxford Handbook to Greek Drama in the Americas*.<sup>7</sup> But she systematically presented Cook as the intellectual guiding force in their conjugal relationship, even though she was equally well read and by far the better dramatist.

Born in 1876, and raised in poverty on a Midwestern farm, she was fascinated by the native Sauk people. Throughout her life she remained deeply identified with the Mid-West and the people who had inhabited it before the Europeans came, an identification most explicit in her tragedy *The Inheritors* (1921), which is partly inspired by Sophocles’ *Antigone*.<sup>8</sup> Glaspell’s down-at-heel rural Iowa family could not afford to educate her, but she became a local journalist and saved up to enter Drake University at Des Moines in 1897, where she studied Philosophy, Greek, French, History, and Biblical Studies. In 1902 she also took courses in literature at Chicago University, before hurling herself into a bohemian lifestyle and circle of friends in Paris and New York.

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York: Russell & Russell, 1931), and Robert K. Sarló, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982). On Susan Glaspell cf. especially the collection of essays edited by Linda Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Essays on her Theater and Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) and J. Ellen Gainor, *Susan Glaspell in Context: American Theater, Culture, and Politics, 1915–48* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

- 4 L. Ben-Zvi, ‘The Provincetown Players: The Success that Failed’, *The Eugene O’Neill Review* 27 (2005): 13.
- 5 Susan Glaspell, *Fidelity* (Boston [Mass.]: Small, Maynard & Co., 1915), 269. On the importance of the mid-war years in terms of American feminism in literature, theatre and culture more widely, cf. Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick, eds., 1915, *The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art, and the New Theatre in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
- 6 Barbara Ozieblo, *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 119–20.
- 7 Edith Hall, ‘The migrant muse: Greek drama as feminist window on American identity 1900–1925,’ in Kathryn Boshert†, Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell and Patrice D. Rankine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Drama in the Americas* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 149–65.
- 8 *Ibidem*, 161–2.

Her immersion in Greek literature is a neglected aspect of her work; Greek tragedy informed many of her novels, especially *Fugitive's Return* (1929), a bestseller.<sup>9</sup> It tells the story of a Midwestern woman who travels to Greece in a plot that reverberates with motifs and scenery from Euripides' *Ion* (as well as partly modelling its heroine on the impresario of the Delphi Festival performances of Greek theatre, Eva Palmer-Sikelianos).<sup>10</sup>

Glaspell cannot be fully understood without recognising how impressed she was, despite her socialist views, by Cook's superior social class, Ivy League education, and accomplishments. He came from an old English colonial family and was born in 1873 at Davenport in Iowa. He had a passion for ancient Greek myths from childhood, which had led him to build sandcastles representing Troy on family beach holidays.<sup>11</sup> He had studied Classics and English literature at both Harvard and Heidelberg. He worked as a literary critic, taught literature at Iowa and Stanford Universities, and published a novel about the relationship between Nietzsche and Marx (*The Chasm*, 1911). Much of our information about him derives from Glaspell's 1926 biography, *The Road to the Temple*. It is hagiographical in tone, misrepresents the history of his troubled relationships both with her and the Provincetown Players, and under-estimates the threat to his creativity and efficiency caused by his life-long alcoholism.<sup>12</sup> Yet there is no doubt that their mutual obsession with ancient Greek culture, and especially theatre, proved a strong bond and that they must have discussed individual plays in detail. The passionate commitment to feminism in *The Athenian Women* is, I suspect, the result of Glaspell's steady input. Although colluding in stereotypes of women as irrationally swayed by physical desire, and overly concerned with justifying Aspasia's complicity in breaking up Pericles' marriage to Kallia because Love Conquers All (perhaps because Glaspell, was perceived as having broken up Cook's first marriage), it voices trenchant opinions. Aspasia says: "the Athenian woman who marries accepts the life of a cow".<sup>13</sup>

*The Athenian Women* premiered on March 1st, 1918 with the Provincetown Players, arguably the most important non-commercial off-Broadway theatre companies in the USA ever.<sup>14</sup> There were other experimental theatre groups, especially after the 1911–12 USA tour by the Abbey Players from Dublin, and

9 For Glaspell's debt to Aristophanes, cf. Marina Angel, "A classical Greek influences an American feminist: Susan Glaspell's debt to Aristophanes," *Syracuse Law Review* 52 (2002): 81–103.

10 On whom cf. especially Artemis Leontis, "Greek Tragedy and Modern Dance: *An Alternative Archaeology?*" in Kathryn Boshier, Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell and Patrice D. Rankine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 204–20.

11 Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple* (2005 edition), 29.

12 Cf. the remarks of Linda Ben-Zvi in her edition, Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*.

13 George Cram Cook, *The Athenian Women, with a Modern Greek translation revised by C. Carthaio* (Athens: H.F. Kauffman, 1926), 40.

14 For the origins of the group cf. Robert K. Sarlós, "The Provincetown Players' Genesis or Non-Commercial Theatre on Commercial Streets," *Journal of American Culture* 7 (1984): 65–70.

the *Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* of Euripides with which the English director Harley Granville Barker had toured Ivy League campuses in 1915.<sup>15</sup> One was the Washington Square Players, founded in 1915. Some of the new groups were part of the “Little Theatre” movement,<sup>16</sup> and some had experimented with Greek drama; in 1913, the Chicago Little Theatre had already performed Euripides’ *Trojan Women* under the direction of Maurice Brown.<sup>17</sup> However, the Provincetown Players were destined to become by far the most influential of such organisations: luminaries of the American Left including Emma Goldman were in attendance at the premiere of *The Athenian Women*.<sup>18</sup>

It was Cook’s first full-length play and the first on a three-act scale to be performed by the Players. The venue was their little theatre at 139 Macdougal Street in the middle of Greenwich Village. The play was given just seven performances, culminating in a single touring production in the much larger and better equipped Bramhall Playhouse on East 27th Street, in front of the members of the Women’s Peace Party of New York.<sup>19</sup> The enterprise was challenging since the play contains more than thirty parts, played by twenty-five actors. The costumes, by Helen Zagat, made of cheap cheesecloth, simulated those to be seen in the classical artworks of the fifth century BCE. The designer, Ira Remsen, strove to recreate the sights and ambience of classical Athens with attractively painted flats and drapes, “authentic”-looking furniture, and a cut-out of the Acropolis.<sup>20</sup> The director, Nina Moise, insisted on adding three wide shallow stairs, which led down into the audience, breaking the boundary between audience and players to increase the sense of political immediacy. Reviewers commented on the skill with which she negotiated the tiny stage by artful grouping of the actors.<sup>21</sup>

*The Athenian Women* was not published until 1926 (after Cook’s death in 1924), in Greece, in a bilingual edition; the facing translation in colloquial modern Greek was a revised version of one originally made by Cook himself. He had dreamed of producing the play in Athens.<sup>22</sup> The decision to publish it

15 For the Granville Barker productions cf. Hall and Macintosh (2005) chapters 171–18; for the tours, E. Hall, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides’ Black Sea Tragedy* (New York: OUP, 2013), ch. 11.

16 On which cf. especially the eye-witness account of the movement by Harriet Monroe, “Little Theatres and Poetic Plays,” *Poetry* 11.4 (1918): 201–207.

17 Cf. Kathryn Boshier and Jordana Cox, “Professional Tragedy: The Case of Medea in Chicago, 1867,” in Kathryn Boshier, Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell, and Patrice Rankine, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97–8.

18 Deutsch and Hanau, *Provincetown*, 27. On the cultural influence of the Players cf. especially Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

19 Alfred Kreyborg, *Troubadour: An Autobiography* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), 24.

20 Edna Kenton, *The Provincetown Players and The Playwrights’ Theatre*, with additional material by Jackson R. Bryer, Travis Bogard, Edna Kenton and Bernadette Smyth, published as special edition of *The Eugene O’Neill Review*, 21.1–2 (1997): 71; Heywood Broun, review of *The Athenian Women* in *New York Tribune* (March 4, 1918): 9.

21 Kenton, *Provincetown Players*, 71.

22 Glaspell, *The Road to the Temple*.

in Greece, rather than as one of the selected Provincetown plays that appeared in the USA,<sup>23</sup> was made by Glaspell and Greek friends. It was necessary because severe disagreements over the future direction of the company between Cook and other prominent players had resulted in him leaving the USA, with Glaspell, for what amounted to self-imposed exile.

The volume containing *The Athenian Women* exists in remarkably few known copies and is difficult to access, so one aim of this essay is merely to offer an account of the nature and contents of the play itself.<sup>24</sup> Another is to demonstrate how Cook uses his ancient subject matter and sources to address, from a radical socialist perspective, the contemporary international crisis of capitalism and militarism. It will become apparent that the play struggled to reconcile a somewhat nostalgic, 19th-century idealising Romantic Hellenism, and a traditional theatrical form – the realist stage play – with what were utterly radical political ideas. Cook was ultimately too wedded to an idealising view of the “sublimity” and exceptional status in the cultural history of classical Athens, and to 19th-century dramatic forms, to do justice to the dynamic political, intellectual and social energies unleashed by the momentous revolutions that were shaking the world. A contemporary classical scholar insisted that his passionate Philhellenism refuted “the charge that the magic of Greece is merely a glamour of conventional tradition, fostered by the Schools. If ever a spirit was untrammelled by tradition and convention, that spirit was George Cram Cook’s.”<sup>25</sup> However, in hindsight, the glamorising of the “glory” of Periclean Athens, and the debt owed by the production to the craze for Greek plays in “authentic” costumes, which had swept “the Schools” constituted by North American campuses since the 1880s,<sup>26</sup> do look surprisingly conventional.

The opening Act I of the play, “Kallia and Aspasia”, is set in the Athenian house of the independent courtesan Aspasia in 445 BCE. A migrant from the Greek city of Miletus, she is not yet Pericles’ lover. Pericles is married to Kallia and pursuing an imperialist policy against other Greek states. The visionary pacifist Aspasia is partially informed by the figure of Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, for it transpires that she has been the spiritual mentor of a young philosopher named Socrates. Pericles heard about her from this disciple “one

23 E.g. George Cram Cook and Frank Shay, *The Provincetown Plays* (Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd Co., 1921).

24 I have made a photocopy of my personal copy, which is available to the public for consultation by appointment at the Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama at Oxford University.

25 Grace H. Goodale, review of Glaspell’s *Road to the Temple*, in *The Classical Weekly*, 23.15 (1930): 117.

26 Cf. K. Hartigan, *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage: Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theater, 1882–1994* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995); Fiona Macintosh, “Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Productions,” in Patricia Elizabeth Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 284–323; Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750–1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Helene P. Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Bosher et al., *Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*.

starlit night in Euboa... He spoke of the wisdom of love in you. He said that to know you was a kind of revelation". It was Aspasia who taught Socrates to listen to his "inner voice".<sup>27</sup> Aspasia is attached to the working-class politician Lysicles, and they discuss how to stop Pericles' militarism. However, Aspasia, a woman of exceptional intelligence, charisma and rhetorical skills, also persuades Kallia both to pressure Pericles into ceasing from pursuing a war policy and into helping her make an alliance with the women of Sparta. There is a faint suggestion that Kallia has fallen under Aspasia's erotic spell just as much as her husband will later; the Provincetown Players were nothing if not sexually open-minded.

Act II, "The Women's Peace", sees Aspasia put her plans into action at an Assembly of Women taking place during the women-only festival of the Thesmophoria in the temple of Demeter. The women lead a revolt against Athenian imperial expansionism. Much to Lysicles' disgust, Aspasia becomes more interested in beautifying Athens than in achieving economic equality for the people. Pericles is persuaded by Aspasia to make Athens a city of artistic rather than imperialist enterprise. Ictinus, the architect, is becoming increasingly frustrated because Pericles is financing war rather than building projects: Aspasia insists that Pericles needs to conquer Megara and Corinth not by force of arms but through the mind, through beauty, architecture "and the voices of the tragic poets".<sup>28</sup> He is duly persuaded and subsidises the rebuilding of the Acropolis. When Ictinus and the sculptor Phidias appear, Pericles gives them two thousand talents. Phidias says to Ictinus, "we can build the temple true to your sublimest vision...the fairest since the world began!"<sup>29</sup> Pericles also transfers his affections from Kallia to Aspasia. The passion is mutual.

The third Act, "A Candle in the Darkness", is set in 431 BCE. The audience are to imagine a fourteen-year interval has passed, during which peace has blessed Athens. The Parthenon has been erected, the rebuilding of the Acropolis completed,<sup>30</sup> and endless artistic and philosophical dialogues conducted in the salon of Pericles and Aspasia, where the action is now set. However, when a vengeful Kallia joins forces with a politician to bring Pericles and Aspasia down, events spiral tragically out of control, and the Peloponnesian War breaks out. The dream of the peace-loving democratic "City Beautiful" is over and replaced by a bleak realisation that war in Greece and the ultimate destruction of the Athenian democracy are both inevitable. Alcibiades is lurking in the wings, hoping to become a king or tyrant. Kallia has emotionally defected to Sparta, opposes the democracy, and argues that the best outcome

27 Cook, *Athenian Women*, 168.

28 Cook, *Athenian Women*, 170–4.

29 Cook, *Athenian Women*, 210.

30 This is far from the historical truth: the completion of all the building and sculptures of the Acropolis temples took many more years. Cf. E. Hall, "Greek Tragedy 430–380 BC," in Robin Osborne, ed., *Debating the Athenian Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 269–70.



for Greece would be for the aristocrats of the two major cities to join forces and set up an oligarchy. Lysicles is still hoping for transnational communism, but Aspasia has become disenchanted with all politics except for pacifism. Pericles is still obsessed with Athenian glory and ordering the rounding-up of every Boeotian in Attica so that he can take reprisals. The play closes with the pathetic fallacy of a violent storm raging outside, and Aspasia mournfully ruminating: "O Pericles – our great bright circle – this life which has created beauty – we have been but a candle burning in the darkness – a point in space – a bright ripple on a black wave – a boat on a shoreless sea!"<sup>31</sup>

Although many historical characters are introduced into the action, including Hermippus, the comic poet, the intellectual heart of the play is in the triangulated viewpoints of the three main political agents, Pericles, Aspasia, and Lysicles. They are all historical figures, although Lysicles is less famous, because far less is said about him in ancient sources than the other two. Pericles is a great leader, pragmatist and a patriot who regards the defence and glorification of Athens as his primary goals, and is prepared to wage war on and dominate other Greek states in order to achieve them. In 445 BCE he is indeed persuaded by Aspasia to relinquish militarism and focus the city's revenues and his energies on the rebuilding of the Acropolis, but by fourteen years later he is unable to sustain this position given the disintegration of the fragile peace that has temporarily kept conflict between the Greek city-states in abeyance. Aspasia believes that women are crucial to the abandonment of international war; she shares attributes with both Aristophanes' Lysistrata and Praxagora in *Assemblywomen*. But she tends towards a mystical view both of love between men and women and of human destiny. She is also an egalitarian who sympathises with the far more radical socialism of her lover Lysicles, but ultimately sees peace and cultural projects such as theatre and the decoration of the Parthenon as more pressing concerns than economic levelling. Lysicles is a communist (he uses the word several times), who regards as absolute priorities the abolition of slavery, the removal of class distinctions, and the advancement of the poor. His viewpoint is supported by other characters, such as the barefoot old Thracian slave woman, who points out that the slaves never voted for the war.<sup>32</sup> At times it seems that Aspasia is in partial agreement with Lysicles. When he attempts to stop Pericles from receiving endorsement for annexing Euboea, for example, he fails because class snobbery blights the Assembly. Lysicles is a livestock-merchant, and when he tries to speak, Pericles' clique makes sheep noises. Aspasia announces that inherited wealth stops people from thinking independently and turns women into "merchants of love."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women*, 320.

<sup>32</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 08, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 60, 36–8.

This threefold clash of political ideals and policies, rendered more emotionally intense because both men are in love with Aspasia, is articulated in the long central scene in Act II. Pericles was played by Cook himself, in a manner unkindly described by one reviewer as resembling “a very recently commissioned second lieutenant in the reserve corps.”<sup>34</sup> The role of Aspasia was taken by Ida Rauh, the woman with whom Cook was currently conducting an affair despite his recent marriage to Glaspell. This no doubt heightened the erotic electricity:<sup>35</sup> Glaspell herself did not act in this play, although this may not necessarily be significant since she had not previously performed in plays by anyone other than herself. A closer examination of some of the interchanges will both crystallise the ideological tensions underpinning the play and illustrate the tone and tenor of its dialogue.

Aspasia, being an idealist, has become an ardent supporter of Pericles’ plan to rebuild the Acropolis: as she says to him, “the realisation of your dream of the City Beautiful is at this moment nearer to my heart than anything on earth.”<sup>36</sup> She has, in fact, earlier sent Lysicles to the Assembly to broker an agreement with the Athenian citizens that they will make a thirty years’ peace with Sparta, but she aims to keep Pericles in power so that he can achieve his plans for the Parthenon. Lysicles is understandably annoyed when he divines her true strategy:

I came to you glowing with a great triumph – having accomplished all that you most desired – bringing my achievement as a gift of love. The great communist ends which you and I proposed within reach. One more stroke and I would be master in Athens! You stopped that stroke! You sent me away to save Pericles the final blow. I see now what you did! And now – again you do not wish to speak to me – you are so absorbed in saying things I may not hear to the man who must be overthrown if we are to succeed!<sup>37</sup>

Aspasia urges him to reconcile himself and his party to Pericles, and transform the city together into “the Peace of Beauty,”<sup>38</sup> for she is beginning to doubt whether economic communism is practicable at Athens at all, at least in their era.<sup>39</sup>

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34 Broun, review of *The Athenian Women*.

35 For the affair between Cook and Rauh cf. L. Ben-Zvi, *Susan Glaspell: Her Life and Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 196–197. It was certainly significant enough to have featured in fictionalised form in a novel about Provincetown by Harry Kemp, *Love among the Cape Enders* (New York: Macaulay Co., 1931). Other parts in *The Athenian Women* were played by Floyd Dell, Rita Wellman, Dorothy Upjohn, Christine Ell, O. K. Liveright, Augusta Cary, and Alice MacDougal; Lysicles was played by Sidney K. Powell and Kallia by Marjorie Lacey Baker.

36 Cook, *Athenian Women* 188.

37 Cook, *Athenian Women* 190.

38 Cook, *Athenian Women* 194.

39 Cook, *Athenian Women* 196.



ASPASIA: The communism we dreamed is not the only truth. Perhaps our minds create truth by perceiving it, as our eyes create landscape out of unseen earth and sky. Pericles too sees truth. It is worthwhile to cause Athens to bring an unknown splendour into the world.

LYSICLES: With the same old needless sacrifice of all the poorer citizens? The slaves to remain slaves? All those the mind of Pericles is unable to realize as human – nothing to be done to give them human lives – In order to go on piling up great fortunes for the few?

ASPASIA: Perhaps it is the few who must bring beauty into the world; and later a time when the many shall share it.

LYSICLES: I want the many to share it now, to help create it.

Lysicles persists: “It was a greater vision you shared with me – to make beautiful the common life of men.”<sup>40</sup> But he is outnumbered; Pericles insists that communism is impossible in Athens – nobody can ever bring about “the holding of wealth in common” – and Aspasia, albeit reluctantly, agrees. They say it is more important to build the Parthenon so the people can have that in common instead.

Indeed, Aspasia seems to think that unity of the spirit must precede economic justice and that a shared work of art can somehow produce such spiritual oneness: “Wealth can be in common only as a result of a harmony of men’s minds. If Athens makes herself a work of art, she will come to have the artist mind, which out of discordant things shapes harmony.”<sup>41</sup> Aspasia is, ultimately, a Hegelian idealist: she believes in some historical dialectic, but that it is motored by the ideas in human minds; Cook suggests, using Phidias as a mouthpiece, that this strategy can never work. As war breaks out again in the final act, Phidias laments that the Acropolis “is neither Ionian nor Dorian. It is Greek. It is the marriage of the moving spirit of the sea with the stable spirit of the mountains. It is the soul of the sailor and the shepherd. But while we have achieved Greek art, you statesmen have not achieved Greece!”<sup>42</sup> Lysicles is the hard-core revolutionary Marxist who is grimly aware that the rich will never willingly surrender their wealth and privileges. He also believes that the struggle for social justice should transcend state borders – as if the international proletariat of the world should unite. It is revealing that by the end of the play Aspasia agrees: “Yes, as all the nations should combine to make one world. They could if they believed it. But they do not believe it.”<sup>43</sup>

Cook, therefore, is using Periclean Athens as a venue to stage a debate between various strands in contemporary communist thought: can art and debate in the ideological sphere help to create the conditions that will usher in socialism (a view to which, far away in Italy, Antonio Gramsci was beginning,

<sup>40</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 198.

<sup>41</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 200.

<sup>42</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 238.

<sup>43</sup> Cook, *Athenian Women* 280.

entirely separately, to develop)? Or are a revolution and transfer of wealth and property the necessary preconditions of the end of Capitalism? The play asks the question but does not answer it.

*The Athenian Women* was, above all, a detailed theatrical response to the immediate historical context in which it was conceived and performed amidst the international repercussions of the 1917 Russian revolution. Some reviewers objected to the transparency of the contemporary topicality, “the too obvious attempt to state present-day problems in terms of Greece, causing the spectator to hurtle ‘out of the illusion.’”<sup>44</sup> The Russian government had fallen on November 7th to the Bolsheviks, whose revolutionary committee had agreed on an armistice with the Central Powers. The USA had been at war with Germany for a year, a conflict that had included the bloody Battle of Passchendaele. On March 3rd, just after the opening of *The Athenian Women*, the Americans signed the treaty of Brest Litovsk, which made that armistice official. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to persuade the world to respect the Russians’ right to self-determination. In Act II of *The Athenian Women*, the meeting of the Spartan Agesistrata and Aspasia at the festival of the Thesmophoria, modelled on the opening episode of *Lysistrata*, is a thinly disguised USA-Bolshevik peace summit: “With your help we will make our cities friends for ever,” says Aspasia to her Spartan counterpart.<sup>45</sup>

The idea to write a new play about women arguing for peace in classical Athens resulted from Cook’s personal conviction that there were remarkable parallels between the Peloponnesian War and World War I. He believed there had been revolutionaries in Periclean Athens comparable to those who were making strides in Russia (in 1922 to become the USSR) and the socialists in America, amongst whom he and Glaspell counted themselves. In the “Preface” to the text of *The Athenian Women* he lays out his understanding of the crisis in classical Athens before and after the death of Pericles, from the plague, in 429 BCE. The text of the Preface was written at the time of the play’s production on March 20th, 1918. This is so important to our understanding of the script that I quote the relevant section in full:

A play must be true to its own orbit, not to history, unless history happens to be true to it. Critics of “The Athenian Women”, however, have too readily assumed that the play diverges from Greek fact to make a modern parallel. I feel rather that those Athenian events could not be truly perceived by me until I looked back on them from the similar tragedy of our time. Sharing a world-experience like that of the Peloponnesian War, we can feel its story more deeply than any generation between theirs and ours.

Like the war which began three years ago, the Peloponnesian War was a long time brewing; it actually began with the invasion of Plataia, a small state

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44 Broun, review of *The Athenian Women*.

45 Cook, *Athenian Women* 132.

whose neutrality, like that of Belgium, had been guaranteed by all the chief belligerents. The leading sea-power then as now fought in the name of democracy against the less democratic great power of the land.

As to the communist movement in Athens – it was there or it would not have been satirised by Aristophanes, whose play *Ekklesiazousai* makes fun of “dividing up”, even as antisocialists in America valiantly attack that idea of straw.

I believe there is nothing to show that Lysicles, the rough man refined by Aspasia, was not a communist. During those months after the death of Pericles when with the help of Aspasia Lysicles became head of the state, a capital levy or tax on capital, believed by Thucydides to be the first tax of the kind in Athens, was decreed and enforced.\* It has been surmised that Cleon was the author of this measure because he was at the time a member of the Council. It is a surmise more natural to attribute it to the man actually in power. The capital levy on the private holders of the then existing wealth can be interpreted as the first step of a communist confronted with conditions. Soon afterward, in the winter of 428, Lysicles was killed in Karia whither he had sailed to collect taxes.

There must have been, in reality, something in the political life of Athens which led Aristophanes in “*Lysistrata*” (“End-war”) to show a woman of very feminine genius saving Greece by a sex-strike against the war. Some impulse to that among Athenian women, or no such play by Aristophanes. Another woman of sufficient political power to accomplish such a deed, or suggest its accomplishment, may have lived in Athens, but we do not know her name. The prototype of *Lysistrata* was Aspasia or some person unknown.

If things happened as in “*The Athenian Women*”, it would explain the abrupt change in Athenian policy in the autumn of 445 BC, when Pericles, after reconquering revolted Euboea, suddenly renounced the reconquest of the revolted subject cities Thebes and Megara (which had massacred its Athenian garrison) and withdrawing the Athenian claim of lordship over territories in Peloponnesos and on the gulf of Corinth, signed the Thirty Year Peace.

It was in the year of that volte-face from imperialism that Pericles, divorcing his wife who was his cousin, began to live with Aspasia. The play assumes that these twin events, coincident in time, one political the other personal, are vitally interrelated.

Perhaps in this the play diverges more from our historical accounts than from the events themselves. Whether or not true in this instance, it is true in general that the brooding dream which brings a play to life is of a nature to bridge with truth gaps not filled by those poor piecemeal records from which men must write history. This is particularly true of those sources of public events which trace back into privacies of soul. (*The Provincetown Players' Club*, 138 Macdougall Street, New York, March 20th, 1918).

\*Thucydides 3.19.1: “The Athenians needing money for the siege, although they had for the first time raised a contribution (*eisphora*) of two hundred talents from their own citizens, now sent out twelve ships to levy subsidies from their allies, with Lysicles and four others in command.”<sup>46</sup>

46 Cook, *Athenian Women* “Preface,” 2–7; cf. Glaspell, *The Road*, 191.

Cook here actually claims that the *Assemblywomen* of Aristophanes proves that there was “a communist movement” in Athens, and that “there is nothing to show” that Lysicles, Aspasia’s lover, “was not a communist”. Lysicles, claims Cook, was responsible after Pericles’ death for introducing the first tax on property ever levied in Athens, and in his scholarly footnote he cites the brief sentence in Thucydides that does indeed remark on the unprecedentedness of this measure.

The debates between Lysicles, Aspasia, and the other principal characters correspond with the types of conversation that took place between the Greenwich Village radicals. Susan Kemper’s analysis emphasises the thematic opposition the play explores between beauty and war, which she thinks that Cook insists “cannot hold sway at the same time; yet these contradictory impulses constitute a given in human society, and in the mind of most individuals as well.” She argues that the play “transcends” such a simplistic dichotomy, “expressing as it does some of Cook’s deepest perceptions about the ambivalence of human nature and the precarious position peace and beauty occupy in the affairs of men in the rare times they are able to prevail at all.”<sup>47</sup> But the Provincetown Players were talking about much more than peace, war, and beauty. They were arguing about whether they embraced the principles of the Bolshevik revolution. This much more challenging and immediate debate is minutely reflected in the politics of Periclean Athens as staged by the Provincetown Players. There is actually an official “Communist Party” led by Lysicles, an Oligarchist Party led by Antiphon (a historically attested anti-democrat who was one of the masterminds of the 411 oligarchic coup),<sup>48</sup> and one that is not named led by Cleon. This demagogue’s characterisation is taken over uncritically from Thucydides; he is cynical, ruthless, and vindictive, actually stating that he will adopt any policy if it is expedient for “reasons of state.”<sup>49</sup> A ruthless militarist concerned solely with the narrow Athenian “national” interest, Cook’s Cleon echoes the sentiments of the most belligerent portion of the American population.

The populist right wing had long pressed for the USA to enter World War I, their jingoistic fervour fuelled by the destruction of the luxury Cunard liner “Lusitania”, which had sailed from New York and was torpedoed by a German U boat in May 1915, with the loss of over a thousand passengers, 128 of whom were Americans. However, Cleon may also reflect the Provincetown Players’ horror at the campaigns of William Joseph Simmons, who in 1915 established the “second wave” of the Ku Klux Klan, headquartered in Georgia, under the name of “the Invisible Empire”. It officially promulgated a policy

47 Susan Kemper, “The Novels, Plays, and Poetry of George Cram Cook, Founder of the Provincetown Players,” PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1982, 123–4.

48 E. Hall, “Political and cosmic turbulence in Euripides’ *Orestes*,” in A. Sommerstein et al., eds., *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari: Levante, 1993), 267–8.

49 Cook, *Athenian Women* 248, 274.

it called “Americanism”; its creed was as anti-Jewish as it was anti-African American, and closely associated with D. W. Griffith’s racist silent movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915, originally entitled *The Clansman*), which had inspired Simmons.

Yet the figure of Lysicles, and his ideological clashes with Aspasia, reflect, instead, the painful factionalism of the socialist movement in the USA at that time. Aspasia is undoubtedly the mouthpiece for the policy of trenchant opposition to entering World War I espoused by the Socialist Party of America at its 1917 Emergency National Convention,<sup>50</sup> a cause to which Cook had devoted a great deal of journalistic energy ever since the outbreak of war in Europe became inevitable in 1914. However, behind Lysicles, there probably stands the figure of Louis Fraina, the figure who was most influential on the radical wing of the Socialist Party. He was co-editor between 1917 and 1918 of the New York City-based fortnightly magazine *The Class Struggle*; he was publisher in 1918 of the first book to make the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky on the revolution available in English (*The Proletarian Revolution in Russia*).<sup>51</sup> He was supported by the Boston-based Socialist Propaganda League, which supported Lenin, had called for all American socialists to embrace the Bolshevik revolutionary project, and given rise to two new organisations. These were the “Friends of New Russia”, which came into being almost immediately after the revolution, and the “American Bolshevik Bureau of Information”, formed around the time of the production of *The Athenian Women* in early 1918. Both provided positive information about the Russian revolution to the general American public. But the situation in Russia bitterly divided American socialists. A small majority wanted to use constitutional parliamentary means to gain influence, while the revolutionary left wing split in two. One substantial faction formed the Communist Party, officially founded in 1919, under the chairmanship of Fraina, while the other formed the Communist Labor Party. The chaos into which Athens is plunged at the conclusion of Cook’s play is a theatrical equivalent of the tumultuous arguments besetting the radical political scene in America in 1918.

At this turning-point in history, Cook’s decision to write a play informed by Greek democracy and Greek drama was almost over-determined. Ancient Greek theatre texts were known in radical American circles, as they had been in pre-revolutionary Russia,<sup>52</sup> to offer inspiration to causes harnessing culture to the furtherance of political ends. More than seven decades earlier, the feminist and abolitionist Margaret Fuller had already harnessed

50 Esther Corey, “Lewis Corey (Louis C. Fraina), 1892–1953: A Bibliography with Autobiographical Notes,” *Labor History* 4 (1963), 107.

51 Cf. Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 107.

52 E. Hall, “Mob, Cabal, or Utopian Commune? The Political Contestation of the Ancient Chorus 1789–1917,” in J. Billings, F. Budelmann and F. Macintosh, eds., *Choruses, Ancient and Modern* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 281–307.

the women of Greek myth and tragedy in her challenge to the oppression of women in contemporary America, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845): “Iphigenia! Antigone! You were worthy to live! We are fallen on evil times my sisters! Our feelings have been checked; our thoughts questioned; our forms dwarfed and defaced by a bad nurture. Yet hearts, like yours, are in our breasts, living, if unawakened; and our minds are capable of the same resolves”.<sup>53</sup> In New York City in 1908, a group of African-American literary figures and theatre professionals formed to promote collaboration, build a library, and celebrate African American achievements. No doubt intrigued by the figure of the clever and resilient slave Xanthias, they called themselves the *Frogs* after Aristophanes’ comedy, in which he and Dionysus star.<sup>54</sup> The pageant Jack Reed organised for the Paterson silk-workers’ strike in Madison Square Garden on June 7th, 1913, featured a Greek-style “chorus” singing socialist anthems as a central strategy of the Industrial Workers of the World, who were sponsoring the strikers.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Cook was himself directly inspired by the Aristophanic model of a civic theatre of argument and protest. He had seen a production of *Lysistrata* in New York City in 1914, and wrote to Glaspell lamenting the lack of political theatre in contemporary society, the lack of “freedom to deal with life in literature as frankly as Aristophanes’, and of a society like his, which had “the habit of thinking and talking frankly of life.”<sup>56</sup>

It was to fulfil the dream of a new, American version of the ancient Athenian theatre that Cook and Glaspell had initiated the amateur dramatics from which the Provincetown Players emerged. Two friends had hired a cottage in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with a veranda and a sea-view, for the summer vacation in 1915. A group of radical writers and artists gathered. The group staged two of their own plays on July 15th, in makeshift sets on the veranda. One was by co-written by Cook and Glaspell; it was a satire on the fashion for Freudian theories amongst their peers and entitled *Suppressed Desires*. The event caused a stir and created a demand for a second performance, so the plays were re-presented in an improvised theatre in a fish-shed on a wharf.

The success of the “new stagecraft” encouraged Cook to lead the others in presenting two more plays that summer and to maintain the enthusiasm for the project when the group moved back to Greenwich Village in New York City for the winter. So, in the summer of 1916, a much larger number of

53 Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 113; cf. Susan Curtis, “An Archival Interrogation,” in Boshier et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, 13–15.

54 Anon., “Well Known Performers Organize the ‘Frogs,’” *New York Age* (July 9, 1908) 6, col. 2; cf. Curtis, “An Archival Interrogation,” 17–18.

55 E. Hall, “The migrant muse: Greek drama as feminist window on American identity 1900–1925,” in Boshier et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, 149–65.

56 Glaspell, *The Road*, 249–250.



avant-garde cultural figures went to Provincetown. The group now included some extremely famous figures and is immortalised in the 1981 movie *Reds*, written, directed by, and starring Warren Beatty as John Reed (author of *Ten Days that Shook the World* [1919]), with Diane Keaton as Louise Bryant and Jack Nicholson as Eugene O'Neill.<sup>57</sup>

The important Provincetown Players productions of the 1916 season included O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* and Susan Glaspell's feminist masterpiece *Trifles*, which is itself much influenced by Greek tragedy, especially Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Medea*.<sup>58</sup> Under Reed and Cook's leadership, supported at every juncture by Glaspell, the group became an official organisation at the end of the summer. Its avowed purpose was to foster a serious new American theatre by encouraging playwrights and experimentation beyond the limits of the commercial stage of Broadway. In the autumn of 1916, the group set itself permanently in New York City, turning the main reception room in the Macdougall Street apartment into the theatre where *The Athenian Women* was produced. The stage was three metres by four metres, and there were wooden benches to seat 140.

The group struggled at first. There were not enough good new plays being written, and the acting was amateur. But Nina Moise, who had been trained as an actor, began to help with the direction when she joined the company in early 1917. The Stage Society of New York helped financially. Reed's involvement lessened under the demands of his journalism, and Cook became the sole leader. Arguments raged in the fledgling company over three issues: how far its work should be publicised and advertised, whether critics should be allowed to review the plays, and the preservation of the original amateur ethos.<sup>59</sup> Cook was an inspirational figure who wanted the company to stick to its original anti-commercial vision. By 1919 the tensions between him and the more ambitious of the younger members of the group led to his self-exile; he and Glaspell moved to Greece in 1922. Cook had attempted to imitate the ancient Athenian model of a democratic citizens' theatre that could address political issues directly; the Provincetown Players subsequently moved from "amateurism toward professionalism, from utter spontaneity toward long-range planning, and from ecstatic communal creation toward collaboration burdened with natural friction".<sup>60</sup> However, *The Athenian Women* is a product of that exciting moment when there was considerable optimism

57 For a detailed if overly negative assessment of the major figures in the group, cf. Robert Humphrey, *Children of Fantasy: The First Rebels of Greenwich Village* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

58 E. Hall, "The migrant muse".

59 Cf. further L. Ben-Zvi, "The Provincetown Players: The Success that Failed," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 27 (2005): 9–21; Jeff Kennedy, "Experiment on Macdougall Street: The Provincetown Players' 1918–1919 Season," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 32 (2010): 86–123.

60 Robert K. Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 159.

about the future of the company under his leadership, in the spring of 1918. This coincided with the unprecedented boost to socialist morale provided by the Russian revolution and the waves of strikes and labour unrest in Western Europe that followed it.

The importance of Cook to the formation of the Provincetown Players remains in the crucial ways in which *The Athenian Women* crystallised the contradictions and tensions of the historical moment in the spring of 1918. The American Left's somewhat muddled idealisation of classical Athens must not, however, be allowed to obscure the instrumentality of Glaspell's contribution to the birth of indigenous American theatre, primarily through her dialogue with O'Neill. She learned from O'Neill, but he certainly learned from her and benefitted from her encouragement. Glaspell herself, although published as a journalist and novelist, did not attempt to write drama until her husband demanded it in 1915, needing new plays for the company. O'Neill joined them the following year. The Provincetown players produced fifteen of O'Neill's plays and eleven of Glaspell's before the original company disintegrated in 1922. Her influence upon O'Neill has never been systematically evaluated, although their contemporaries were in little doubt about it. Koutsoudaki's study of O'Neill's adaptations of Greek tragedy acknowledges a debt to the Provincetown group as a whole, especially Cook, Glaspell and Reed, arguing that he was heavily influenced by the reverence these "idealists" felt for Greek drama, combined with their interests in mysticism, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, and the "Cambridge ritualists".<sup>61</sup> Feminist writers have pointed out how O'Neill flourished in a circle of writers with a far larger proportion of women than he would have found in any other context.<sup>62</sup> But, in terms of O'Neill's stagecraft and the tight economy of his writing, his observation of "unities", the debt he owes specifically to Glaspell, has never been recognised. And it was his "Greek plays" which ensured that a whole school of politically progressive American tragedy would continue to look to the Greeks until much later in the twentieth century. In Glaspell there is a communist feminist, in love not only with George Cram Cook but with the ancient Greeks and their dramas, standing in the half-light of the very dawn of the 20th-century classical American drama.

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61 Mary Koutsoudaki, *The Greek Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Athens: Athens University Press, 2004).

62 Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown 1915–1922* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002); Judith E. Barlow, "Influence, Echo and Coincidence: O'Neill and the Provincetown's Women Writers," *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 27 (2005): 22–28.

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## SUMMARY

### American Communist Idealism in George Cram Cook's *The Athenian Women* (1918)

*The Athenian Women*, written by the American George Cram Cook with input from Susan Glaspell, is a serious, substantial play drawing chiefly on *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*. It premiered on March 1st 1918 with the Provincetown Players. Cook was convinced of parallels between the Peloponnesian War and World War I. He believed there had been communists in Periclean Athens comparable to those who were making strides in Russia (in 1922 to become the USSR) and the socialists in America, amongst whom he and Glaspell counted themselves. The paper examines the text and production contexts of *The Athenian Women*, traces its relationships with several different ancient Greek authors including Thucydides as well as Aristophanes, and identifies the emphatically stated socialist and feminist politics articulated by the two main 'proto-communist' characters, Lysicles and Aspasia. Although the play was not particularly successful, its production had a considerable indirect impact on the future directions taken by left-wing theatre in the USA, through the subsequent dramas of Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill for the Provincetown Players.

## POVZETEK

### Idealizem ameriškega komunizma v drami *Atenke* (1918) Georgea Crama Cooka

*Atenke*, ki so prišle izpod peresa Američana Georgea Crama Cooka s prispevkom Susan Glaspell, so resna in tehtna drama, ki se opira predvsem na komediji *Lizistrata* in *Ženske v skupščini*. Premiera je bila 1. marca 1918 v gledališki skupini Provincetown Players. Cook je verjel v vzporednice med peloponeško in prvo svetovno vojno. Menil je, da so v Periklovih Atenah obstajali komunisti, primerljivi s tistimi, ki so v njegovem času napredovali v Rusiji (ki je leta 1922 postala ZSSR), in s socialisti v Ameriki, med katere sta se prištevala oba s Susan Glaspell. Članek analizira besedilo in uprizoritveni kontekst *Atenk* ter odnos drame do različnih grških avtorjev, med njimi do Tukidida in Aristofana, ter identificira eksplicitno socialistično in feministično politiko dveh osrednjih »protokomunistov«, Lisikleja in Aspasije. Čeprav predstava ni bila posebej uspešna, je imela uprizoritev posredno precejšen vpliv na usmeritev levičarskega gledališča v ZDA preko dram, ki sta jih za Provincetown Players nato ustvarila Susan Glaspell in Eugene O'Neill.