



Introduction to Tragedy

From the wild worship of Dionysus to a high form of drama and literature

Dionysus

- Originally **an early fertility** deity with particular responsibility for **viticulture** (the raising of grapes) and **the production of wine**
 - Was **worshipped rurally at seasonal festivals** celebrating the planting of vines, harvesting of grapes, the making of wine, and the opening of previous year's wine
- Not simply the god of wine but rather **what wine does to those who drink it!**
 - Dionysus was the god of **liminal abandon**: inhibitions were suppressed and people "crossed boundaries"
 - Dionysus was **the polar opposite of Apollo**, who represented law, order, and custom
 - *His worship became a "safety valve" from the restrictions and discipline that was supreme the rest of the year*
 - Dionysiac festivals were similar in character to modern **Carnival** or **Mardi Gras**
- **Tragoidia** or "goat songs"
 - Worshippers, frequently dressed as **goats**, danced around an upright pole adorned with a mask that represented Dionysus
 - As they danced they sang praises to Dionysus
 - A group of such singer-dancers was called a **chorus** (literally "a dance in a ring")

Tragedy in the Archaic Period

- Remember that Homer bridged **the Dark Age** (1100–750 B.C.) and **the Archaic Period** (700–500 B.C.)
- This is the period of “**Old Greece**” (the meaning of “archaic”), mostly because later scholars see the next period, the Classical Period (500–404 B.C.), as being the one that witnessed the greatest cultural and political achievements
- Nevertheless, this period saw great advances
 - It witnessed some of the **fundamental developments in Greek culture and civilization**
 - Renewed trade brought **prosperity and new ideas** to the Greek communities scattered throughout the Aegean
 - the fundamental political unit, **the polis or city-state**, developed and witnessed a **political evolution that eventually led to the development of democracy**
 - Above all it was **a period of artistic and intellectual innovation**, including in **the new genre of tragedy**

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

3

Dionysus and Drama

- The rural festivals of Dionysus were made a city festival in the Archaic Period, giving birth to drama—including **tragedy** and **comedy**
 - Dramatic competitions at **the great Dionysiac festivals in Athens**
 - **Thespis** creates the first **actor**, who played a specific part and dialogued with the chorus
- Tragedies **ceased to be songs simply praising Dionysus** and soon many topics as their themes, especially **the misfortunes of heroic figures from Greek legend**
 - Tragedies became so **disconnected from their Dionysian origins**, that later commentators later noted they had “**nothing to do with Dionysus**”
- Whereas comedy retained many of its “unbounded” characteristics, **literary tragedy began to reflect the characteristics of Classicism**—restraint, balance, symmetry, more “Apollan” principles
 - Still, the very sense of **acting**, pretending to be one that one was not, “**crossed boundaries**”
 - The tragic form, as described by Aristotle, continued to revolve around **strong, primal emotions**

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

4

Elements of Greek Theater

- Peisistratid **Theater of Dionysus** on the slopes of the acropolis in Athens
- **Theatron**: “watching area,” the semi-circular area of tiered seating
- **Orchestra**: round “dancing” floor for the **chorus**, the descendant of troops of rural “goat men” who had danced and sung around poles representing Dionysus in the rural festivals
- An altar to Dionysus
- **Skēnē**: “tent” but later a wooden or stone scene building or stage behind the orchestra
- **Proscenium**: our “stage,” the raised area between the orchestra and the *skene*

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

5

Theater of Dionysus

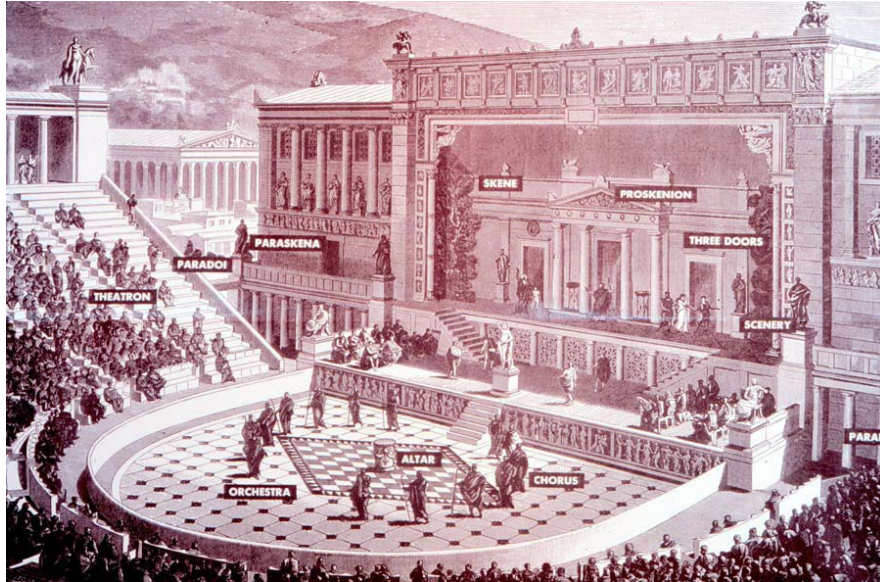


2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

6

Theater of Dionysus Reconstruction



2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

7

The Great Classical Tragedians

- While the tragic competitions began in the Archaic Period, our surviving tragedies come from the next period, **the Classical Period (500–404 B.C.)**
 - Athens rises to supremacy after victory in the Persian Wars
 - high period of Greek sculpture and architecture including the Parthenon and other temples on the Acropolis in Athens
 - In addition to Classical tragedy, **the genres of comedy and historiography also developed in this period**
- **Aeschylus** (524?–456 B.C.)
 - *Invented the second character, made tragedy a full dramatic form with costumes, sets, dance, and music*
- **Sophocles** (c. 496–406 B.C.)
- **Euripides** (c. 480 BC–406 B.C.)

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

8

Characteristics of Classical Tragedy

See excerpts from Aristotle's *Poetics* (see MP-R, 89-94)

- Six elements of tragedy: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song
- Purpose: **catharsis**, or the arousal of pity and fear and bringing about “the purgation” of such emotions
- **Plot**
 - Representation of action in tragedy, ordered arrangement of incidents
 - “Tragedy is the representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness—and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action.”
 - Reversals and Recognitions
- **Tragic character**: good but not too good, one with whom the audience can identify
 - “The sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice or depravity, but rather to some error . . .”
 - **Hamartia**: a simple mistake in judgments that brings about tragic consequences

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

9

Aristotle on History and Poetry

- “The difference between the historian and the poet is not in their utterances being in verse or prose . . . the difference lies in that fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that *can* happen. **Hence also poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.**”
— Aristotle, *Poetics* 38 | 51b1 (Else, 32–33)

2/13/2009

10. Introduction to Tragedy

10