

GREEK TRAGEDY

ORIGINS, STAGING AND FORM

ORIGINS

Dionysus, the God of wine and ecstasy, was worshipped at a major festival held every year by the Athenian State. Wealthy men (or in the sixth century B.C., the tyrants) vied with each other to provide splendid choruses, who sang the ritual hymn in honour of the God and extolled his virtues. These choruses were a feature of Greek life: the major rites de passage in many city-states (birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death) as well as religious ceremonies were commemorated by a group of men, boys or girls singing and dancing the appropriate song of triumph, praise or woe. Choruses even sang Victory Odes, commissioned by victors in the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean Games from famous poets such as Pindar of Thebes.

Alcman of Sparta composed Partheniai (Maiden-songs) to glorify Artemis. The girls in the chorus are picked out by the poet for praise of their beauty.

Is not Hagesichora
of the lovely step here beside us?
Does she wait with Agido,
and with her commend our performance?
But you Gods, accept their prayers,
for the end and the achievement
come from God. My chorus leader,
maiden as I am, I say
I have only shrilled in vain
from the roof tops
like an owl; yet I would also
please our Lady
of the Dawn; for it was she who
came to heal us of our trouble.
Maidens, we have come to the peace desired,
all through Hagesichora's grace.

Here the poet makes the chorus speak for its individual members. Sometime in the late 6th, at Athens, a certain Thespis detached one member from the chorus to answer its song. A form of drama, basic and extremely limited, now became possible. The Greek verb 'to answer' is 'hūpokrinoumai', an answerer 'hūpokritēs' (whence we get hypocrite - a man who pretends an emotion he doesn't have). This word becomes the Greek for 'actor'.

Thespis is said to have won the first prize in the drama competition at Athens in 534 B.C., but we have no idea as to the form his drama took - none of his works have survived. The first dramatist we can really discuss is Aeschylus (Aiskhulos)

The first play of Aeschylus preserved is "The Persians" (Persai), coincidentally the only extant Greek tragedy dealing with a contemporary event, the defeat of Xerxes at Salamis in 480 B.C. By 472 (when "The Persians" was produced), we have recognizable drama. Aeschylus added a second actor (Aristotle 'Poetics' Ch. 4) with the result that the characters could argue with each other, tell each other news and react individually in a way the chorus never could. Western drama was born.

DEVELOPMENT

Tradition (reported by Aristotle) tells us that Sophocles added a third actor. (Some modern scholars would like to attribute this development also to Aeschylus, but have so far failed to prove their case). Aeschylus had certainly adopted the third actor by the time the 'Agamemnon' was produced in 458 B.C.

Thus by the mid fifth century B.C., the components of developed Greek tragedy, three actors and Chorus had arrived on the scene.

COMPONENTS

1). Actors

Three actors - but all the plays have larger casts. Doubling (or even trebling) was essential. We have no idea why the Greeks limited themselves in this way. Something must have been lost in terms of depth of portrayal possible when, for example, in Sophocles' 'Antigone', the same actor played Antigone, Teiresias and Eurydice. Like the Shakespearean theatre women did not appear on stage.

'Character' is a Greek word. It comes from 'Kharaktêr' - a stamp (like the stamping of the head on a coin). Their concept of character was the opposite of Sartre's dictum:

"What matters is not what is done to you but what you make of it" (L'être et le Néant). In other words they believed that what was done to you shaped your character. Actions and character thus coalesce.

This is not to mean that there is no "characterization" in our sense of the term in Greek Tragedy - What characters are more well-rounded than Oedysius, Antigone or Phaedra? - but to stress much more the definition of a person by his fate.

Acting style must have been different from that of the theatre we know today. All characters wore masks (perhaps there was a second one for Oedipus after the blinding) which eliminated any possibility of facial expression. This was perhaps not too much of a loss, considering the vast size of the audience in times before the invention of opera-glasses!

Gesture and movement must have been all-important, as well as positioning of characters on the stage. The variations between set-speeches and line-for-line dialogue gave opportunities for much imaginative use of space and gesture.

2). Chorus

Readers of Greek tragedy complain that the chorus 'holds up the action' and 'utters long irrelevant speeches', or, at the very least, claim that the presence of fourteen people on stage throughout most of the play necessarily detracts from the 'realism' or 'naturalism' of the performance, particularly if they seem to have no connection with the action. The latter point cannot be right; the identity of the chorus is chosen with great care for each production. In the 'Agamemnon' the chorus are depicted as the elders of Argos, too old to go to Troy, but still loyal to their absent king. Their old age, fidelity and sense of foreboding add an urgency to their desire for the King's return - a desire which is transmitted to the audience. Their lack of action during the murder is reasonable enough - they are old and have no stomach for the fray. The convention of their remaining on stage is thus motivated by the nature of the chorus. In the 'Prometheus', the daughters of Ocean have a close relationship with the fallen Titan. The chorus of Theban Elders in Oedipus the King and Antigone are directly relevant to the plots surrounding the Royal House of Thebes. In 'Hippolytos' the chorus of Troezenian women who are the faithful followers of Phaedra articulate the position of Phaedra within her household and the effect her sickness and passion have on it and them.

Perhaps this implies that the tragedians were making the best of a bad job. But there is more to it than that. The choral odes were not just spoken - they were sung and danced. Unfortunately all the scores and choreography for

these performances have been lost (although some promising work has been done in reconstruction), but we must see the chorus as contributing to the totality of the theatrical effect. Greek drama has been likened to Opera, with its recitative and aria, or ballet. Recent theatrical trends, particularly the theatre of Brecht, have returned the song and dance to modern theatre. Like the Greeks, we are learning to appreciate "Total Theatre".

Even if the song and dance added to the audience response we would still feel cheated if the lyrics by which we as audience were so excited bore no relevance to the dramatic situation. Mythical digressions, trite reflections, say the critics, reduce the pace of the drama, which after all, involves action. True, if correct. However, the mythical excursions refer directly to the action of the play. In the "Agamemnon" the chorus comment on key events before the Trojan War, on the background to the expedition, relating it directly to the wishes of the Gods - awaking our fear for Agamemnon?

FESTIVALS

Festivals with a religious origin were an integral part of Greek life. In Athens itself festivals were spread throughout the year to celebrate the Gods of civic or local cult (cf. H.W. Parke: The Athenian Festivals). In early spring Dionysis was worshipped, and his major festival, the City Dionysia, was attended by people from all the Greek-speaking world. At this prestigious festival, drama was performed in honour of the God.

The responsibility for running the City Dionysia was in the hands of the Archon, the chief civic officer, the elected citizen who gave his name to the year. He had to select three poets from those who applied to compete by offering a group of new plays, three tragedies and an after-piece in the form of a satyr-play (not a comedy but a kind of burlesque of tragedy). He had also to ensure the financing of the competition by finding for each playwright a sponsor called the choregus who was responsible for funding the chorus, a flute-player, masks and costumes, actors and later, a professional chorus-trainer - not to mention a celebration party after the play. Probably, as professionalism crept in, the main actors, one for each playwright, were state-paid, just as it ceased to be customary for the playwright to act himself. Judges were selected by lot by a quite complicated procedure, and their names kept secret until the performance itself.

A day or two before the festival a proagon was held which gave full details of the programme to the public, and the playwrights, actors, choregi, musicians and choruses paraded for inspection. The statue of Dionysus was first carried to its traditional shrine on the Acropolis and then brought by torchlight to the theatre. The first day of the festival proper was given over to a public holiday and processions, followed by several days of competitions of various sorts, the dramatic one coming as a climax and taking four days in time of peace, reduced to three during the Peloponnesian War, during each of which three tragedies and an afterpiece were performed (a comedy followed later in the day). At the end came the verdict of the ten judges, five of their votes being drawn out at random by the Archon. The victory celebrations followed with a concluding day when the citizens gathered to review the conduct of the festival.

Remember:

1. The plays were each written for one-off performance - there was no thought of a 'run' or a 'revival'.
2. Playwrights submitted texts and applied for a chorus - the stress was on the choral aspect of performance.

3. Playwrights directed and acted in their own plays (like Shakespeare). Texts were not meant to be circulated and read - they were meant to be seen, therefore there were no complicated stage directions as in Shaw, O'Neill or Arthur Miller. As there was no thought of revival stage-directions were not needed - the playwright-director knew what he wanted and 'taught' (the Greek "to produce a play" is "to teach a play") the moves to the cast.
4. All the plays were written for prizes - competitive element among playwrights.
5. With all the casts, choruses, musicians, judges, backstage men, festival officials, priests etc., the total number of participants would be around 1500.
6. Capacity of theatre of Dionysius - circa 17,000 - everything would have to be done in the grand manner.
7. The extraordinary religious-nationalistic-holiday-competitive atmosphere that must have pervaded both audience and performers alike.
8. The Composition of the audience - Athenians of all classes, priests, public officials as well as women (& possibly slaves?).

THE THEATRE

The existing theatre of Dionysos is later than the fifth century B.C., and the excavated remains of the earlier wooden theatre are so scanty as to give endless ground for speculation. The only well-preserved Greek theatre which has not been altered in the Roman Period is that at Epidarus (built c.340 B.C.), and it may be (but I suspect isn't) dangerous to read back too much from it to fifth century practice.

The tiers of stone seats, usually arranged in a natural hollow centred on the orchestra. 'Orchestra' means 'threshing-floor' and it was on the rounded threshing-floors in each village community that the chorus danced the ritual songs. The circular orchestra in Greek Theatre was where the Chorus danced.

Behind the orchestra was the stage itself - the logeion (speaking-place) with the skene or stage-building (originally a tent = skene whence we get scene).

Open-air daytime performances were not lit (even if the technology existed for lighting). Like Shakespearean drama, much of the setting of scene and atmosphere must be done by the speeches. The Watchman opens the Agamemnon with a speech which makes us believe that we are not sitting by day in a hot, sunny theatre, but watching an event taking place on a cold night, in the same way as

"Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear,

That tips with silver all these truit-tree tops"

took the audience out of the Globe to a garden in Verona by night.

The scenery was also rudimentary: the skene-building generally representing a palace.

/over

Prologos - the part of the action before the Chorus enters. In Agamemnon, the watchman's speech, in Hippolytos the speech of Aphrodite, Hippolytos' prayer and his argument with the servant. This is not a prologue in our sense of the word - like Chorus' speech in Henry V:

"Admit me Chorus to this history,
Who prologue-like, your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play."
it is the first part of the action.

Parodos - the entry of the chorus - they sing and dance their way along the entrances (parodio) to the orchestra.

Epeisidion - (Eng. = episode) - the actors' spoken dialogue in between the choral odes.

Stasimon - Choral song and dance remaining in orchestra.

Usually two or more epeisodia follow, framed by stasima.

Exodos - chorus and actors leave the stage.

A methodical analysis, but perhaps too detailed for our purposes. What is important is the contrast between speech and song in a tragedy.

The chorus sing their formal choral odes, divided into stanzas called strophe and antistrophe, sometimes accompanied by an epode. These units correspond exactly in terms of metre, for they shape the dancing of the chorus - in a Strophe they turned (strephomai in Greek = I turn) to the right and in the antistrophe (antistrephomai in Greek = I turn back) they danced back. Presumably the epode was sung while standing still.

Apart from these formal odes, the chorus sang short passages (as at the end of the Oedipus the King, Hippolytos) and short prayers (e.g. prayer to Aphrodite at Euripides' Hippolytos l. 1268). Nevertheless, they also engage in spoken dialogue with the actors. This is at the end of a long speech which they endeavour to sum up, but also their major function in spoken dialogue is to pass on information to characters on stage. The chorus never intervenes in the action or argues with a character.

The actors speak to each other in iambic speech, sometimes long speeches (rheseis) sometimes in line-for-line dialogue (stichomythia), and sometimes in speeches of intermediate length.

Stichomythia adds an immediacy and tension to dialogue, as the characters quickly take up the lines from one another.

A term you may meet in your reading about Greek tragedy is 'agon'. No Greek ever used this term - it is a modern coinage and refers to two long set speeches posed against each other (e.g. Theseus/Hippolytos in Hippolytus 934-1035). It derives from the critical idea that these scenes are in some respect, infected with law-court oratory. You must make up your minds for yourselves how far this is so.

The actors could break out into sung arias. At moments of great excitement, anguish or pain characters sing in lyric metres. Oedipus sings the pain of his blinding, Cassandra's prophecy begins in song and she calms down into speech, while the chorus who began calmly in speech begin to sing as fear and foreboding possess them.

The mixture of speech, choral song and individual song gives the totality to the Greek theatrical experience.

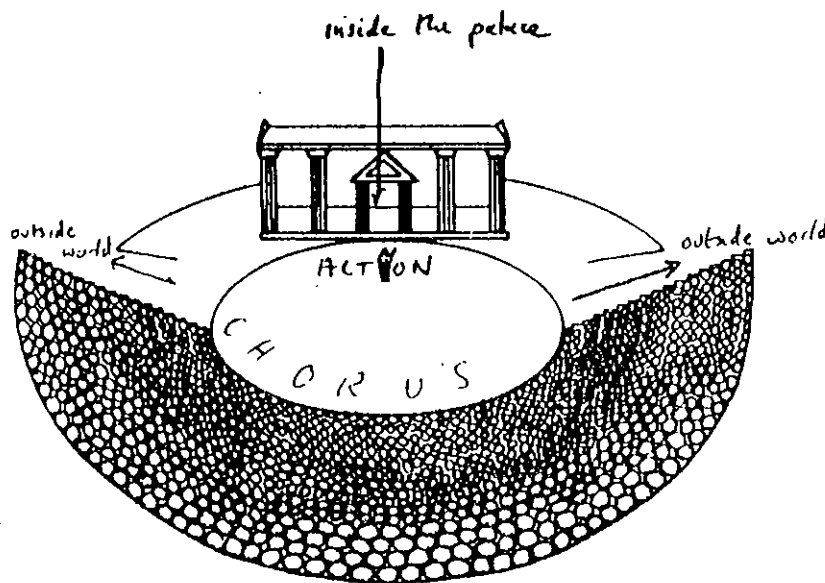


Fig. 2

Nevertheless, the arrangement gave scope for spatial contrasts. The orchestra and stage embrace the action here and now. The side exits (parodoi) lead out to the outside world, from which people come to affect the action. The skene building, serving as the palace, adds yet another spatial dimension - what occurs within the building.

Aristotle tells us that Sophocles was the first to use scene-painting. He would certainly need it for the rocky island of Lemnos in the 'Philoctetes' and Aeschylus would need to create a separate scene for the 'Prometheus' - the rocky crag of Caucasus. Presumably a suitably painted cloth could be draped across the skene-building.

If Gods needed to appear, they could walk on the roof of the Skênê - cf. Euripides "Electra", l. 1233;) or appear in a crane or "mechanê" - hence "deus ex machina". (Parodied in Aristophanes "Clouds".)

The only other mechanical device available to the Greek theatre was the ekkuklêma - a revolving or wheeled platform which revealed things that had happened within the Skênê to those outside. The bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra are revealed at "Agamemnon" l. 1390. This device is frequently parodied by Aristophanes. (Cf. Acharnians 407 = p. 67 Penguin; Clouds 185 = Penguin p. 119).

Events taking place outside the acting area are related by a messenger. There was no rule that violence and bloodshed should not be shown on stage. Hippolytos is brought on stage to die horribly mangled, Oedipus enters with blood dripping from his eyes, Sophocles' Ajax in the Ajax appears on the ekkuklêma surrounded by the carcasses of sheep he has slain in his madness. Later in the same play, he falls on his sword on stage. In the Oedipus at Colonus, there is a tussle between Creon and his guards and Theseus and his guards when Creon tries to kidnap Oedipus. Action, sometimes violent, and bloodshed, were not banned from the Greek stage.

Apart from those props demanded by the text, the opinion of modern scholars is that they were few and served merely to define the status and role of the character

~~a sceptre for a king, laurel wreath for a herald, etc.~~

Costume was grand for all characters. Long robes with stars and gilt added to the splendour of the occasion. Euripides departed from the convention in many of his plays (not the Hippolytos) by depicting some characters in rags, or beggars' clothes, when such parts were being performed. Aristophanes mocked: clearly the immediacy was disturbing.

FORM

From all this, certain conventions developed which were exploited to the full by the Tragedians.

Aristotle (Poetics, Ch. 12) analyses the form of tragedy. We must remember that he was writing half a century after the hey-day of the genre and was as subjective and liable to error as any critic. After classifying plants and animals, he turned his vast critical ability to the classification of tragedy.

He decided that a Greek Tragedy was formally constructed as follows:

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Stichomythia adds an immediacy and tension to dialogue, as the characters quickly take up the lines from one another. A particularly good example of this comes from Romeo and Juliet'

PARIS: Haply met, my lady and my wife.
 JULIET: That may be, sir, when I may be a wife.
 P. : That may be must be, love, on Thursday next.
 J. : What must be, shall be
 FRIAR: That's a certain text.

Juliet's resistance to Paris is emphasized by the picking up of his expressions in this lightning fast interchange. The rhyme speeds on the argument and gives it an inevitability. Look for examples in your set plays.

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CHRONOLOGY

- C534 Thespiis said to have produced the first tragedy.
- C501 Record of tragic contests at Dionysia begins.
- C493-2 Phrynichus put on "Fall of Miletus" (a play about a contemporary disaster) - fined for putting it on.
- 472 Aeschylus (525/4 - 456) produced "Persians" (also on contemporary theme).
- 467 Aeschylus: Seven Against Thebes.
- 458 Aeschylus: Oresteia.
- 457/6 Aeschylus: Prometheus.
- 445 : Sophocles (496-406) Ajax.
- 441 Sophocles: Antigone
- 438 Euripides (480-406) Alcestis
- 431 Euripides: Medea.
- 428 Euripides: Hippolytus.
- 427 Sophocles: Oedipus.
- 415 Sophocles: Electra. Euripides. Trojan Women.
- 414 Euripides: Ion; Heracles.
- 413 Euripides: Helen.
- 409 Sophocles: Philoctetes.
- 408 Euripides: Orestes.
- 406 Euripides: Bacchae; Iphigeneia in Aulis.
- 401 Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus produced.
 (N.B. Many of these dates, particularly those of Euripides, highly dubious.)