

BACKGROUND OF GREEK TRAGEDY

GREEK TRAGEDY

Tragedy was performed in Athens at the three annual festivals of Dionysus, the most important of which was the Great Dionysia (or “City Dionysia”) in late March. On three successive mornings at this festival, three tragic poets, who had been selected competitively earlier in the year, each presented a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies and a satyr-play. In addition, the festival featured comic and dithyrambic contests, and religious processions and rituals of various kinds. At the close of the festival ten judges who had been chosen by lot determined the winners and awarded prizes.

Besides writing the plays and composing the accompanying music, the poet was responsible for directing the production and supervising rehearsals. Often, in earlier times, he acted the role of the *protagonist*, or central character, also, but this tradition seems to have been broken in the time of Sophocles. The poets chosen to compete at the festivals were assigned actors, chorus, extras, and musicians by the state. The costs of the production were paid by the *choregus*, a wealthy citizen appointed by the government to do this as a *liturgy*, or public service. The privilege of backing the plays was considered a great honor, and the *choregus* shared the praise and awards given the poet if their plays won first prize.

Because attendance was a civic and religious obligation as well as a source of entertainment, admission to the theater was originally free. When it eventually became necessary to charge for tickets, the state provided funds for all citizens who could not afford the price.

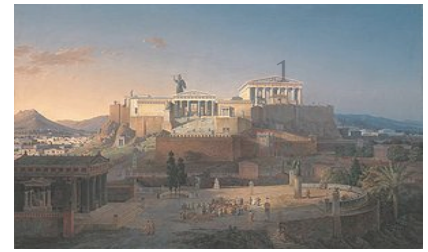
ORIGINS



Tragedy is thought to have developed from the ancient dithyramb, or choral lyric, which was sung by a male chorus in honor of the god Dionysus at these annual festivals. These performances also included group dancing and probably some brief dialogue between the leader and the chorus. At first the dithyramb was a crude improvisation based on the myths about Dionysus and may have taken the form of a rough burlesque or satire, from which the satyr-play of classical drama was derived. In time it came to have a more formal artistic structure and its content was expanded to include stories from the whole legendary tradition.

At some point a radical transformation in approach took place and a serious philosophical attitude replaced the older boisterousness. The addition of an actor to the chorus allowed more complicated and lengthy stories to be used. The father of drama was said by the Greeks to have been Thespis. He first used an

actor in his productions and was responsible for several other innovations. In 534 B.C. Thespis put on the first tragedy at the



SATYR PLAYS

--A burlesque or ribald drama having a chorus of satyrs, usually written by a poet to follow the poet's trilogy of tragedies presented at the Dionysian festival in ancient Greece.

--genre of ancient Greek drama that preserves the structure and characters of **tragedy** while adopting a happy atmosphere and a rural background.

The satyr play can be considered the reversal of Attic tragedy, a kind of “joking tragedy.” The actors play mythical heroes engaged in action drawn from traditional mythical tales, but the chorus members are satyrs, guided by old Silenus. Satyrs are nature spirits who combine male human traits (beards, hairy bodies, flat noses, and an erect phallus) with the ears and tails of horses.

The satyrs are contrasted with the main characters—who are more or less serious—by their dancing, their love of wine, and their diverting banter, often expressed in low language. This contrast, which is the special trait of satyric drama, **served to alleviate the emotional tension** of the tragic trilogy.

“THE SONG OF THE GOATS”



The term “**tragedy**” is derived from the Greek word *tragoidia*, which means something like “goat song.” It is unclear where this term comes from, but there are various theories:

There may have been a goat sacrifice connected with the rites of Dionysus and the original Dithyrambic songs sung at this feast.

The male followers of Dionysus, the satyrs, were half man, half animal and had goat-like features (although horses' tails).

The term is applied to anything overripe, and to be like a goat is to be untamed, or of the country, as opposed to the city. In tragedy, we watch characters overstep the boundaries of usual moral codes and behavior and experience the often horrific consequences. Perhaps the term contains something of the **excessiveness** of tragedy, which would also connect directly to the nature of the worship of Dionysus.

festival of Dionysus in Athens, although his new dramatic form may have been in existence for a short while before this in the rural areas of Attica.

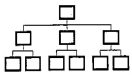
There is some reason to believe, however, that it was Aeschylus who first wrote tragedy in the sense that the word is used today, with the emphasis on content rather than stylistic matters. During the fifth century, tragedy matured and its technique was improved until it became the sophisticated literary form seen in the hands of Sophocles.

Regardless of the changes in style and content, tragic performances remained an important element in the civic worship of Dionysus. The dithyramb also developed along independent lines as a choral medium, and dithyrambic contests continued to be a regular part of the dramatic festivals at Athens along with tragedy for the next few centuries.

PLOTS



The stories used in tragedy were taken almost exclusively from the great cycles of mythology, although occasionally, as in *The Persians* of Aeschylus, a poet might draw upon a contemporary theme. These ancient myths and heroic legends were like a bible to the Greeks, for they recorded what was thought to be the collective social, political, and religious history of the people, and included many profound and searching tales about the problems of human life and the nature of the gods. The custom requiring the use of these mythological stories in tragedy satisfied an essential requirement of the religious function of drama, for it enabled the poets to deal with subjects of great moral dignity and emotional significance.



From a dramatic point of view, the use of plots and characters already *familiar* to the audience ***gave the poet many opportunities for the use of irony and subtle allusions*** that are not available to the modern playwright. Suspense as it is known in the present-day theater could not easily be evoked, but the audience’s attention was created by the poet’s freedom to change or interpret the myths as he thought necessary. The spectators, already aware of the outlines of the story, learned from tragedy what personal motives and outgoing forces had driven the characters to act the way they did. It is thought that the dramatist’s reinterpretation and explanation of the ancient myths was one of the most important factors considered by the Greeks in evaluating his work.

The *solemn* and *exalted* quality of Greek tragedy, and the *purposeful examination of the meaning of life* in which its characters engage, are even today able to make a deep impression on readers, and are direct results of the use of stories based on mythological themes.

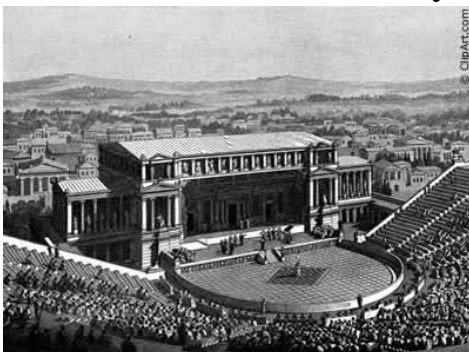
KEY TERMS

IRONY

ALLUSIONS

SUSPENSE

THE THEATER AND THEATRICAL EQUIPMENT



Athens: Theater of Dionysus, 1898 Drawing

The Greek theater was built in the open air and was generally quite large: the Theater of Dionysus at Athens, for example, had more than 17,000 seats. The theaters were usually built in hollowed out hillsides, and, despite their size, had excellent acoustics so that words spoken by the performers could easily be heard in all sections.

The *theatron* was the area in which the audience sat. It was shaped like a horseshoe and had rows of stone seats rising upward until backward in tiers. In the first row were stone thrones for the principal citizens and the priest of Dionysus.

The circular area at ground level which was enclosed on three sides by the U-shaped *theatron* was known as the *orchestra*, or the seeing place of the chorus. In its center was the *thymele*, an altar to Dionysus on which sacrifices were made and which sometimes used as a stage prop during plays. The chorus assembled in the *orchestra* after

marching in through the right or left *parodos*, or entrance passage, and remained there during the rest of the performance. The flute player and occasional harpist who provided musical accompaniment for the tragedies generally sat in a corner of the *orchestra*.

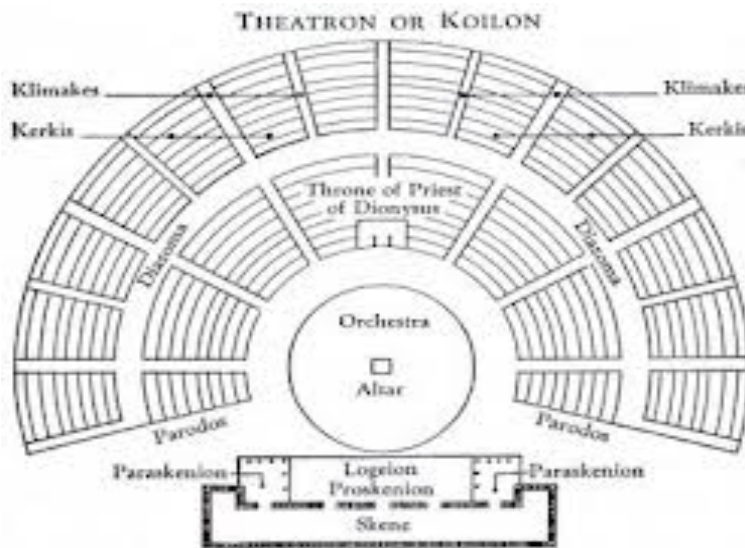
On the side of the *orchestra* which formed the open end of the *theatron* stood a wooden structure, the *skene*, or scene building. This was a dressing room for the actors, but its façade was usually made to resemble a palace or temple and it served as a backdrop for the action of the play. The three doors of the *skene* were used for entrances and exits.

The *proscenium* was the level area in front of the *skene* on which most of the play's action took place, although at times the actors might move to the *orchestra* or even to the roof of the *skene*. There was no stage, but the *proscenium* may have been raised one step higher than the *orchestra*, and there was no curtain.

A few items of technical equipment were available for special effects. These included devices for imitating lightning and the sound of thunder; other noisemakers; painted scenery; the *eccyclema*, a wheeled platform which was rolled out of the *skene* to a tableau of action that had taken place indoors (mainly scenes of violence, e.g., at the end of *Antigone* where the doors of the palace are opened to show the corpse of Eurydice); and the "machine," some kind of derrick that could be mounted on the roof of the *skene* and used to bring about the miraculous appearances of gods.

The actors performed in elaborate formal costumes and wore masks that emphasized the dominant traits of the characters they were impersonating. All members of the cast were male. They had to be competent singers as well as actors because many of their lyrical lines were chanted to music. The mode of acting seems to have been conventional and stylized rather than naturalistic, but it could not have been too artificial, since many scenes call for lively, realistic action.


On the whole, tragic performances must have been very stately and colorful spectacles, in which a pageant-like quality was derived from the brilliant costumes and organized movements of large numbers of players and extras, and the blending of drama, poetry, music, and dance to create a solemn yet entertaining act of devotion to the gods.



THE CHORUS

The *chorus* was the nucleus from which tragedy evolved and it continued to have a central place in the drama throughout classical times. The use of the chorus varied, depending on the method of the playwright and the needs of the play being performed, but most often it acted as the "ideal spectator," as in *King Oedipus*, wherein it clarifies the experiences and feelings of the characters in everyday terms and expresses the conventional



KEY TERMS 

THEATRON

SKENE

ORCHESTRA

ECCYCLEMA

PARADOS

CHORUS

attitude toward developments in the story.

In some plays, like *The Suppliants* of Aeschylus, the chorus was itself a central figure in the tragedy rather than a group of interested bystanders, and this had a direct effect on the size and nature of its role, but usually the chorus was not so closely involved in the action of the drama. In general **the tragedians used the chorus to create a psychological and emotional background** to the action through its odes, to *introduce* and *question* new characters, to *point out the significance* of events as they occurred, to *establish facts* and *affirm the outlook* of society, to *cover the passage of time* between events, and to *separate episodes*.

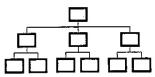


The trend in tragedy was toward a decline in the importance of the chorus, caused mainly by the introduction of additional actors and increasing sophistication in their dramatic use, and by the more personal and complex nature of the stories selected for dramatization. With the passage of time the proportion of choral to individual lines decreased significantly, and the dramatic functions of the chorus, aside from the continued use of choral odes between *episodes*, were greatly reduced.



At a typical performance of tragedy in the fifth century, the chorus marched into the *orchestra* chanting the *parodos* and remained drawn up there until the end of the play. At various points it divided into semi-choruses and moved around in the *orchestra* to suit the requirements of the play, but its most important moments came when it chanted the choral odes to music, accompanied by stylized gestures and a series of intricate group dances. At times the chorus also engaged in a lyrical dialogue, or *kommos*, with one of the characters and made brief comments or inquiries during the course of an *episode*.

STRUCTURE



Classical tragedies were composed within a definite structural framework, although there are occasional minor variations in some plays...[Traditionally,] Greek tragedy was performed without intermissions or breaks.

The following are the main elements of a typical tragedy:

- Prologue**—the opening scene, in which the background of the story is established, usually by a single actor or in a dialogue between two actors.
- Parodos**—the entrance of the chorus, usually chanting a lyric which bears some relation to the main theme of the play.
- Episode**—the counterpart of the modern act or scene, in which the plot is developed through action and dialogue between the actors, with the chorus sometimes playing a minor role.
- Stasimon**—the choral ode. A *stasimon* comes at the end of each *episode* so that the tragedy is a measured alternation between these two elements.
- Exodos**—the final action after the last *stasimon*, ended by the ceremonial exit of all the players.



OUR DEBT TO THE ATHENIANS

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| Theatre seeing place (theatron) | Orchestra choral performing space |
| Drama “doing” or “performing an action” | Thespian thespis |
| Scene from skene (Latin proscenium) | Deus ex machina god on a machine |
| Chorus singing and dancing troupe | Protagonist the first actor in a tragedy |
| Catharsis healing or purification through empathy | Odeon small covered theatre |
| | Podium raised platform |



THE MASK

The mask was a sacred symbol of Dionysus. Vase paintings show us the presence of the god sometimes depicted by a mask hung on a stake. The use of masks goes far back into ritual performance. Often, the participant **dons a mask and becomes the thing he most fears**, an evil spirit, a fearsome animal he must hunt, and in the case of the Greeks, gods, great kings, and women.



It seems that all drama in ancient Greece was performed in the mask. Men played female roles, and although scholars are divided on this point, women were probably not allowed to attend the theatre and were certainly not allowed to perform on stage. Masking contains the seeds of acting, or “playing the other,” as noted scholar Froma Zeitlin has put it. In wearing a mask, the individual performer morphs into something he is not, and so acting develops. There is also a festive element to masking that we still find in the idea of the masquerade, the Venetian masked ball, Halloween, or Mardi Gras. These elements found their way into the performance of comedy and the Satyr play.

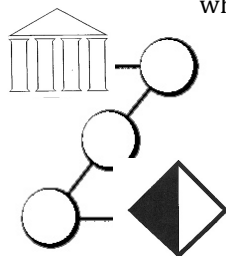


All the actors wore masks on stage. The **tragic mask** was a simple whole facemask made of linen, cork, or wood. It had a small mouth aperture, and there is no evidence at all for any kind of megaphone mouth. This was not necessary with the excellent acoustics of the ancient theatre. The mask was attached to the head by means of a *sakkos*, a small fabric skullcap with realistic hair attached. Female masks were often painted in white to denote gender, and the masks themselves were not much larger than the real human head.

ARISTOTLE ON TRAGEDY



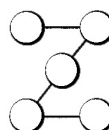
In the *Poetics*, his famous study of Greek dramatic arts, Aristotle (384—322 B.C.) compares tragedy to such other metrical forms as comedy and epic. He determines that tragedy, like all poetry, is a kind of imitation (*mimesis*), but adds that it has a serious purpose and uses direct action rather than narrative to achieve its ends. He says that poetic *mimesis* is imitation of things as they could be, not as they are – i.e., of universals and ideals – thus poetry is a more philosophical and exalted medium than history, which merely records what has actually happened.



The aim of tragedy, he writes, is to bring about a “**catharsis**” of the spectators—to **arouse** in them sensations of pity and fear, and to **purge** them of these emotions so that they leave the theater feeling **cleansed** and **uplifted**, with a **heightened understanding** of the ways of gods and men. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving change in the fortunes of the

drama’s protagonist (Aristotle recognized that the change might not be disastrous, but felt this was the kind shown in the best tragedies—*Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, was considered a tragedy by the Greeks but does not have an unhappy ending).

According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements – plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and song (music), of which the first two are primary. Most of the *Poetics* is devoted to analysis of the scope and proper use of these elements, with illustrative examples selected from many tragic dramas, especially those of Sophocles, although Aeschylus, Euripides, and some playwrights whose works no longer survive are also cited.



CATHARSIS AND MIMESIS



Catharsis is a Greek word that means “purging” or “healing.” From its earliest beginnings, the performance of stories was intended to move audiences to new levels of understanding. The bard acts as a kind of shaman, performing societal taboos and taking his stories across the boundary lines of traditional morality. In this way, the audience can experience a mimetic journey.

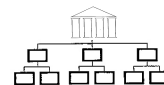
“Mimesis” means the act of imitation and is the origin of the terms “mime” and “pantomime.” When the bard uses the emotional and dramatic power of mimesis to re-create mythological events, the audience is able to experience these emotions themselves without actually suffering the consequences. In this way, they undergo a form of emotional purging through tears, laughter, and new insights. Many Greek theatres were located in or near healing shrines such as the great theatre of Epidaurus, which was part of the shrine of the healing god Aesclepius.

??? WHY ARE CATHARSIS AND MIMESIS IMPORTANT TO A COMPELLING TRAGEDY?

Several of Aristotle’s main points are of great value for an understanding of Greek tragic drama. Particularly significant is his statement that the plot is the most important element of tragedy. He explains—

...tragedy is an *imitation*, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and misery. And life consists of action, and its end is a mode of activity, not a quality. Now character determines men’s qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched. The purpose of action in the tragedy, therefore, is not the representation of character: character comes in as a contributing to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of the tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be one without character...The plot, then is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; character holds the second place.

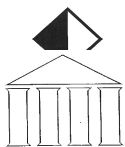
Aristotle goes on to discuss the structure of the ideal tragic plot and spends several chapters on its requirement. He says that the **plot must be a complete whole** – with a definite beginning, middle and end – and its length should be such that the spectators can comprehend without difficulty both its separate parts and its overall unity. Moreover, the plot requires a single central theme in which all the elements are logically related to demonstrate the change in the protagonist’s fortunes, with emphasis on the dramatic causation and probability of the events.



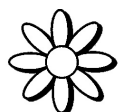
Aristotle has relatively less to say about the tragic hero because the incidents of tragedy are often beyond the hero’s control or not closely related to his personality. The **plot is intended to illustrate matters of cosmic rather than individual significance** and the protagonist is viewed primarily as the character who experiences the changes which take place. This stress placed by the Greek tragedians on the development of plot and action at the expense of character, and their general lack of interest in exploring psychological motivation, is one of the major differences between ancient and modern drama.



Since the aim of a tragedy is **to arouse pity and fear** through an alteration in the status of the central character, he must be a figure with whom the audience can identify and whose fate can trigger these emotions. Aristotle says that “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” He surveys various possible types of characters on the basis of these premises, then defines the ideal protagonist as –



...a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by **some error of judgment or frailty**; a personage like Oedipus...

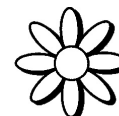



In addition, the hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the spectators, and as a character he must be true to type, true to life, and consistent.

The hero’s error or frailty (**harmartia**) is often misleadingly explained as his “**tragic flaw**,” in the sense of that personal quality which inevitably causes his downfall or subjects him to retribution. However, overemphasis on a search for the decisive flaw in the protagonist as the key factor for understanding the tragedy can lead to superficial or false interpretations. It gives more attention to personality than the dramatists intended and ignores the broader philosophical implications of the typical plot’s denouement. It is true that the hero frequently takes a step which initiates the events of the tragedy and, owing to his own ignorance or poor judgment, acts in such a way as to bring about his own downfall. In a more sophisticated philosophical sense though, the hero’s fate, despite its immediate cause in his finite act, comes about because of the nature of the cosmic moral order and the role played by chance or destiny in human affairs. Unless the conclusions of most tragedies are interpreted on this level, the reader is forced to credit the Greeks (and himself, by implication) with the most primitive of moral systems.



It is worth noting that some scholars believe the “flaw” was **intended by Aristotle as a necessary corollary of his requirement that the hero should not be a completely admirable man**. *Harmartia* would thus be the factor that delimits the protagonist’s imperfection and keeps him on a human plane, making it possible for the audience to sympathize with him. This



KEY TERMS 

IMITATION

CATHARSIS

HAMARTIA

PERIPETIA

ANAGNORISIS

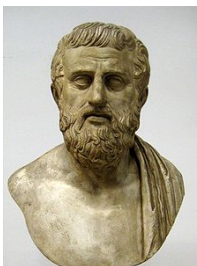
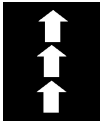
view tends to give the “flaw” an ethical definition, but relates it only to the spectators’ reaction to the hero and does not increase its importance for interpreting the tragedies.

The remainder of the *Poetics* is given over to examination of the other elements of tragedy, and discussion of various techniques, devices, and stylistic principles. Aristotle mentions two features of the plot, both of which are related to the concept of *harmartia*, as crucial components of any well-made tragedy. These are “reversal” (*peripetia*), where the opposite of what was planned or hoped for by the protagonist, as when Oedipus’ investigation of the murder of Laius leads to a catastrophic and unexpected conclusion; and “recognition” (*anagnorisis*), the point when the protagonist recognizes the truth of a situation, discovers another character’s identity, or comes to a realization about himself. This ***sudden acquisition of knowledge or insight by the hero arouses the desired intense emotional reaction in the spectators***, as when Oedipus finds out his true parentage and realizes what crimes he has been responsible for.

Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* nearly a century after the greatest Greek tragedians had already died, in a period when there had been radical transformations in nearly all aspects of Athenian society and culture. The tragic drama of his day was not the same as that of the fifth century, and to a certain extent his work must be construed as a historical study of a genre that no longer existed rather than as a description of a living art form.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle used the same analytical methods that he had successfully applied in studies of politics, ethics, and the natural sciences, in order to determine tragedy’s fundamental principles of composition and content. This approach is not completely suited to a literary study and it is sometimes too artificial or formula-prone in its conclusions.

Nonetheless, the *Poetics* is the only critical study of Greek drama to have been made by a near-contemporary. It contains much valuable information about the origins, methods, and purposes of tragedy, and to a degree shows us how the Greeks themselves reacted to their theater. In addition, Aristotle’s work had an overwhelming emphasis on the development of drama long after it was compiled. The ideas and principles of the *Poetics* are reflected in the drama of the Roman Empire and dominated the composition of tragedy in Western Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.



LIFE OF SOPHOCLES

Sophocles was born the son of a wealthy armor manufacturer around 495 B.C. at Colonus, a village just outside Athens. He received the traditional Greek education in music, poetry, dancing, and gymnastics, and even as a youth was distinguished for his ability and physical beauty. At the age of fifteen Sophocles first gained public recognition when he was appointed leader of the chorus of boys that chanted the paeon (hymn of victory) after the decisive battle of Salamis.

Sophocles’ first tragic tetralogy was performed at the festival of Dionysus in 468 B.C. and after much controversy was awarded the prize over the entry submitted by Aeschylus. From that time on Sophocles held a dominant position in Athenian drama.

During his long and prolific career Sophocles wrote more than 120 plays, won the first prize at the festival eighteen times (i.e., for 72 plays), and never received less than second prize. The names of nearly one hundred of his plays are known and fragments of many are still in existence. The most important of these is a papyrus containing several hundred lines of a satyr-play, *The Ichneutae*, which was found in Egypt in 1907.

Only seven complete tragedies by Sophocles still survive, but none comes from the first few decades of his creative life, so it is not possible fully to analyze his artistic development. The extant plays are *Ajax*, ca. 445 B.C., dramatizing the legendary tale of the hero Ajax’s madness during the Trojan War; *Antigone*, ca. 440 B.C.; *Electra*, ca. 440 B.C., the story of the revenge of Agamemnon’s children on his murderers (also treated by Aeschylus in *The Choephoroi* and Euripedes in his *Electra*); *King Oedipus*, ca. 430 B.C.; *The Trachiniae*, Ca. 413 B.C., the story of the death of Hercules; *Philoctetes*, ca. 410 B.C., concerning an incident in the Trojan War; and *Oedipus at Colonus*, first performed in 401 B.C., five years after the death of Sophocles.

Aside from the general artistic influence of his plays, Sophocles was also responsible for several specific ***technical innovations*** that had lasting effect on Greek drama. These included the introduction of painted scenery, changes in the kind of music used by the chorus, an increase in the size of the chorus from twelve to fifteen members, revision of the tetralogy so that all four plays were no longer required



to treat the same theme, and an increase in the number of actors from two to three, dramatically most important because it allowed more comprehensive development of character and plot.

Sophocles' literary activity also included much nondramatic poetry and a prose treatise on the chorus, none of which are still in existence. In addition, Sophocles, like most Athenians of his time, actively engaged in civic affairs. Though he had no special inclination for such matters, Sophocles served two terms as a general and participated in negotiations with various allies during the Peloponnesian War. He was also a treasurer of the Delian Confederation for a year, held a priesthood, and was a member of several investigatory commissions.

The Athenians considered Sophocles their most successful playwright and his works continued to be valued highly throughout the Greek world even long after his death. Aristotle's *Poetics*, a study of the art of drama written in the fourth century B.C., repeatedly cites ***King Oedipus as the most perfect example of a tragedy*** (ironically, this play only received second prize when it was originally presented at the dramatic festival in Athens). An anonymous biographer some years later showed respect for Sophocles by calling him the "pupil of Homer," and Longinus, a Greek literary scholar of the third century A.D., summed up a generally favorable critique of the noted tragedian Ion by asking,



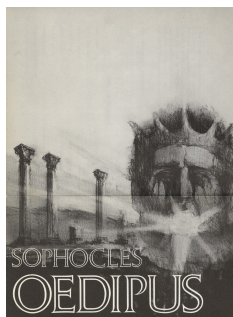
But in tragedy would you prefer to be...Ion of Chios rather than—Sophocles?... Would anyone in his senses regard all the compositions of Ion put together as an equivalent for the single play of *Oedipus*?

Sophocles was particularly admired by his countrymen, because all aspects of his life seemed to fulfill the highest human aspirations. Along with his literary genius and success, he was also noted for his good health and longevity, personal beauty and dignity, conviviality, wealth, and continued good fortune in all things. In every way it seemed as if the gods had selected Sophocles to be the recipient of their blessings and the Athenians loved him for it.

Sophocles lived and wrote during the most creative and prosperous period in Athenian history, the fifth century "Golden Age." He was intimate with many of the greatest men of his era and his powerful dramas were unexcelled, even amid the outpouring of artistic genius that marked the glorious century of his beloved city. Though more than two thousand years have passed, his works are still treasured and admired today.

Sophocles was well into his nineties when he died in 406 B.C. At the time the Spartans were besieging Athens, but the enemy commander declared a truce so the famed poet could be buried in his family's tomb outside the city. It was said afterward that the god Dionysus, the patron of drama, had appeared to the Spartan general in a dream and induced him to grant this final honor to the great tragedian.

To the Greeks, who said, "Call no man happy until he has carried his happiness with him to the grave," the life of Sophocles remained an inspiring example of the heights that could be reached by mortals.



SOPHOCLES, *THE THEBAN PLAYS*

TAKEN FROM: SOPHOCLES. *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS* AND *OEDIPUS AT COLONUS* IN *THE THEBAN PLAYS*. TRANS. PETER MEINECK AND PAUL WOODRUFF. INDIANAPOLIS, IN: HACKETT PUBLISHING, 2003

...[We] will continue our exploration of the works of Sophocles by concentrating on the "Oedipus Plays," *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

It is a common misconception that *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* formed a trilogy, but there are more than forty years separating the three works. They do share a common theme, that of the house of Oedipus in Thebes.



A theme of self-realization through personal tragedy runs through the works of Sophocles and has been called "a flash of perfect clarity."

Sophoclean characters are truth seekers searching for meaning and only reaching understanding at the very moment of his destruction.

OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

This was perhaps the most famous of all Greek tragedies, primarily because in the fourth century BCE it was held by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to be a paragon of tragedy, and then in the twentieth century CE to have entered the psychoanalytical vocabulary of Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*.

THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

The play's title has caused confusion over the years and sometimes led to a misreading of the work. In Latin, it has been called *Oedipus Rex*, which has become translated as *Oedipus the King*. But Oedipus is not a king in the Greek sense, and the term "tyrant" did not necessarily have the same kind of negative connotations that it does today. In ancient Greece, a *Tyrannus* was a sole leader who ruled by popular consent. For much of the sixth century BCE, Athens had been ruled by the tyrant Piesistratus and his sons, and many Greek city-states in the fifth century were still led by tyrants.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We cannot be certain of the exact date of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is usually dated sometime between 430 and 425 BCE. In 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War broke out between Athens and Sparta, rival powers for hegemony over the Greeks. The Spartans had by far the best infantry fighting force in the Greek world, and the prominent Athenian leader at that time, Pericles, knew he could not defeat them on land. But Athens possessed a great navy, whereas Sparta did not, and so Pericles derived a radical defensive policy designed to survive a Spartan invasion.

Two parallel walls running between the city of Athens and her port of Piraeus seven miles away were constructed, forming a defensive shield around the city and her all-important harbor. These "Long Walls" were designed to keep the Spartans from taking the city or interfering with Athens' naval operations.

During the summer campaigning season, Pericles called for the entire population of Attica to live between the walls in what must have been a vast Athenian shantytown. For a while, the policy seemed to work. The Spartans came and went and the Athenian fleet could raid with impunity. But in 430, a plague broke out in Athens because of the overcrowding and decimated the population. Pericles was removed from office in 429, but was restored soon after, only to die of the plague himself.

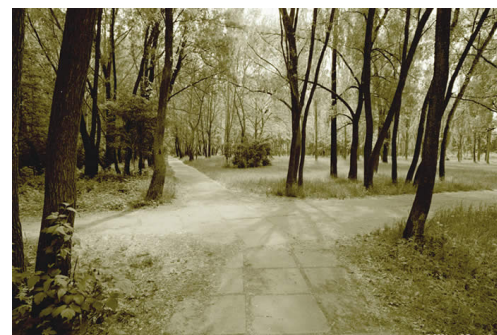
**THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

Oedipus and his family are the central figures in the cycle of legends concerning the royal house of Thebes. In ancient Greece the tales about them were second in popularity only to the stories about the Trojan War and were a fruitful source of ideas for poets and dramatists. There are many versions of most of the stories, but those used by Sophocles are usually considered the standard ones and will be followed here.

About two generations before the expedition to Troy, Laius and Jocasta, the king and queen of Thebes, were warned by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi that their newborn son was destined someday to kill his father and marry his mother. They were horrified by this prophecy and devised a plan which they thought would circumvent it. Laius pierced the baby's feet with an iron pin to prevent him from crawling and secretly gave him to a shepherd, with orders to abandon the child in the mountains where it would die from exposure.

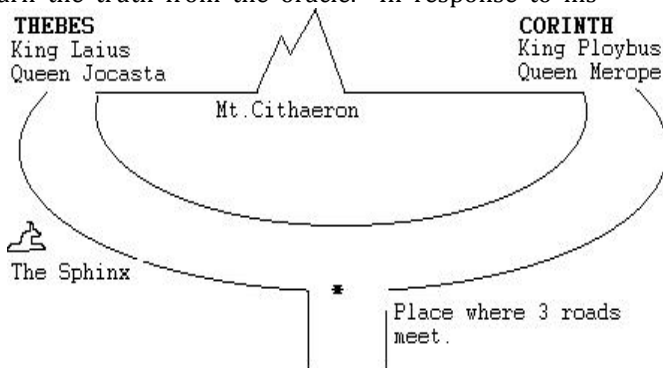
This shepherd was a merciful man and had pity on the innocent baby. When he got to the mountains he gave the infant to his friend, a herdsman from Corinth, without revealing the child's identity. He asked the Corinthians, without revealing the child's identity, to take the baby far from Thebes and later reported to Laius that the king's command had been obeyed.

The herdsman was a servant of Polybus, the king of Corinth. When he returned home he took the baby to his master and said he had found it alone in the countryside. Polybus and his wife Merope were childless. They adopted the infant and named him Oedipus ("Swollen-Foot") because



of his wound. The happy couple pretended he was their own son and raised him as prince of Corinth.

When Oedipus became a young man he heard vague rumors that Polybus was not his real father. These tales troubled him and he went to Delphi to learn the truth from the oracle. In response to his questions, the original prophecy was repeated. Oedipus was told that he was fated to murder his father and marry his mother. Believing that Polybus and Merope were his parents and not wishing to harm them, Oedipus decided not to return to Corinth while they were still alive.



He traveled through Greece and eventually came into the vicinity of Thebes, which at that time was being ravaged by a savage monster, the Sphinx. At a crossroads Oedipus encountered an old man in a chariot, escorted by several attendants. It was Laius, on his way to Delphi to find out how to rid Thebes of the monster.

Laius and Oedipus were both hot-tempered, and a dispute took place about possession of the right-of-way. Laius insulted and struck Oedipus, who defended himself by slaying the king and his servants. He continued on his way to Thebes, ignorant of the names of his victims.

Outside the city Oedipus met the Sphinx, answered her mysterious riddle, and killed her. The people of Thebes acclaimed him as a great hero. When they learned that Laius was dead, supposedly murdered by a gang of bandits, they made Oedipus their new king. He married Jocasta, and in time had four children by her, the boys Eteocles and Polynices, and the girls Ismene and Antigone. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled.



Oedipus ruled wisely and conscientiously for the next few years and Thebes prospered, but suddenly a terrible plague descended on the city. He sent to Delphi for advice and learned that the pestilence was Apollo's punishment to Thebes for having allowed the murder of Laius to go un-avenged. Oedipus resolved to find the guilty person and his investigation finally led him to discover his true parentage. He realized that **he had committed** abominable crimes and, overcome by shame and horror, put out his eyes and abdicated from the throne. Jocasta hanged herself.



Oedipus planned to go into exile, but Jocasta's brother Creon, who was acting as regent, persuaded him to wait until the oracle sent instructions. Oedipus remained in the city for many years before he was finally banished. Now an old man, the blind and friendless Oedipus wandered helplessly through Greece, accompanied only by his faithful daughter Antigone. News of his crimes and the curse which was thought to be on him had spread throughout the land, and Oedipus was rejected by all who met him.

At last Oedipus came to Colonus near Athens, where there was a sacred shrine of the Eumenides. The inhabitants were terrified when they heard who he was, but Theseus, the king of Athens, granted him sanctuary there. Meanwhile, another prophecy had revealed that the city which possessed the grave of Oedipus would have continued good fortune. Creon, who had driven Oedipus from Thebes, now tried to bring him back by force, but the Athenians protected the old man. Oedipus died peacefully at Colonus. The manner and exact place of his death were hidden from all men except Theseus.

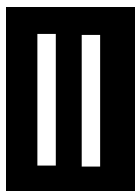
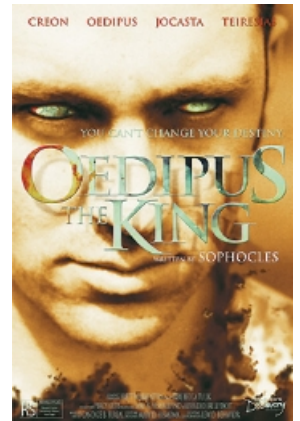
A short while before this Eteocles and Polynices had come of age and were made co-rulers of Thebes, but each wanted sole power for himself. Eteocles gained the favor of the people and with their help expelled Polynices from the city. Eteocles reigned alone while Polynices went to Argos, where he had powerful allies, and raised an army to recapture the throne for himself. In a great battle, which took place outside the city, the Thebans were victorious, and the two brothers killed each other. Creon was made king again.

As his first official act, the new ruler decreed that Eteocles, the heroic defender of Thebes, be given a state funeral, while Polynices, the traitor who had attacked his own city, was to be denied all last rites. This

was a terrible punishment, for without at least token funeral observances the spirit of the dead man would be unable to enter the afterworld.

Many of the Thebans were dismayed by Creon’s edict, but none had the courage to protest. Antigone alone defied the king and buried her brother. When Creon learned of this, he condemned Antigone to die. Creon’s son Haemon, who was betrothed to Antigone, tried to make his father relent and chose to die with her when he was unsuccessful. Creon’s wife, heartbroken at her son’s death, killed herself. With the death of Antigone the house of Oedipus came to an end, for no more was ever heard of Ismene.

A thorough treatment of all versions of the legend with complete references to ancient sources will be found in Volume II of The Greek Myths by Robert Graves.



RELEVANCE

[FROM THE CENTER FOR LEARNING]

Oedipus the King is as compelling today as it was many centuries ago to audiences during the Golden Age of Greece. The author, Sophocles, was the second of the three great Greek tragedians, and in *Oedipus*, he created a perfect example of tragedy as later defined by Aristotle. Of the many plays that Sophocles wrote, only a handful are still extant today—but how amazing that any survived two and a half millennia of human history!

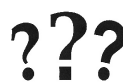
Like all Greek tragedies, *Oedipus the King* was **not** a stand-alone piece; it came with two other related tragedies and a satyr play, but the other three works have been lost. We can only conjecture about their contents. The Theban legend was well known to Sophocles’ audiences. A terrible prophecy came to the king and queen of Thebes, leading them to the decision to get rid of their infant son. Instead of dying, the boy was rescued by a shepherd and then raised by the king and queen of Corinth. Years later, after hearing a prophecy that he would kill his father and mate with his mother, Oedipus fled Corinth and went to Thebes, where he did actually kill his biological father and marry his mother.

Sophocles did not just echo the old story. He transformed a tale of individual woe into an archetypal chronicle of human pride, frailty, and punishment. The action of the play is tightly compressed. It begins barely one hour before Oedipus discovers the truth of who he is and what he has done. For all his intelligence and power, he has been unable to escape the messages of the oracles. In the end, he is impressive in his active suffering and willingness to accept full responsibility for what has occurred. In this tragedy, the hero ends up not dead, but blinded and wandering in exile.

The chorus is as important to the play as the protagonist. The Theban men stand largely outside the action, but they observe and comment on it. The chorus leader on occasion steps out of the group and interacts with the main characters. During the Golden Age of Greece, the chorus certainly provided dramatic spectacle, as well as the perspective of ordinary people on the fate of the great Oedipus.



Western culture owes much to classical Greece in terms of **architecture, philosophy, government, and the arts**. This is particularly true in the development of **drama**, both comedy and tragedy. *Oedipus the King* is one of the most powerful tragedies ever written or staged. The play is brief in comparison with dramatic works of later centuries, but it offers **limitless opportunities to discuss human frailties and potential, dramatic structure, poetic language, and the nature of tragedy.**



EXIT NOTES: SYNTHESIS 3 + 1

TOPIC:

