Introduction to the Tragic Theater of Ancient Athens

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Religious Roots of Tragedy: The Festivals of Dionysus at Athens were called the City or Greater Dionysia, [1] which was held in March or April, and the Lenaea, [2] which was held every January. Although classical theater flourished mainly from 475-400 BCE, it developed earlier from choral religious ceremonies dedicated to Dionysus.

The God of Honor: Dionysus was an Olympian god, and the Greeks originally celebrated his rites in the dithyramb, a stirring choral hymn. [3] In Greek mythology, his followers were *satyrs* and *maenads*. [4] We sometimes call Dionysus the god of ecstasy, and as Kenneth McLeish says, he "supervis[ed] the moment when human beings surrender to unstoppable, irrational feeling or impulse." His agents were wine as well as song and dance, and participants in the Dionysian rites wore masks. So audiences would see strong characters set up at the outset of a tragedy, but the result would be surrender of individual identity to larger, cosmic forces that shape human life.

At the festivals, three tragic writers would compete, and so would three or even five comedic playwrights. The idea was that each tragedian would present three plays and a satyr play. Sometimes the three plays were linked in a trilogy, such as Aeschylus's *The Oresteia.* So the audience had a great deal of playgoing to do during the festival seasons. The activities may have gone on for three or four days, with perhaps four or five plays per day.

Organization: How were the festivals organized? The magistrate, or *archon,* was chosen every year by lot. Then, dramatists would apply to the magistrate for a *chorus,* and if they obtained one, that meant that they had been chosen as one of the three tragic playwrights. After that affair was settled, wealthy private citizens known as *choregoi* served as producers for each playwright. The state paid for the actors, and the *choregos* paid for the chorus's training and costumes. There was both state and private involvement, then, in the production of a tragedy or comedy.

Major Tragic Playwrights: Aeschylus 525-456 B.C. / Sophocles 496-406 B.C. / Euripides 485-406 B.C.

Aeschylus composed around 80 dramas, Sophocles around 120, Euripides perhaps about 90. Aristophanes probably wrote about 40 comedies. Dramatists who wrote tragedies did not compose comedies, and vice versa. While comedies tended to be about current, topical events, tragedy was drawn from the deep well of Greek mythology, from the *mythoi* or stories that Athenian audiences would have known.

The playwright was called a *didaskalos,* a teacher or trainer because he trained the chorus who were to sing and dance. As Greek drama developed, the playwright also took care of the scripts and the music. He was something like a modern director, and may at times have acted in his own plays, especially in the early stages of his career.

A successful dramatist could win prizes, but generally, playwrights were able to support themselves independently by land-holdings. Sophocles, for example, was a prominent citizen – he served as a general and treasurer. Aeschylus was an esteemed soldier against the Persian Empire, and his tombstone supposedly recorded his military service, not his artistic triumphs.

The Theater: The Great Dionysia was held in a theater located on the south slope of the *Acropolis,* or Athenian citadel. [5]

The Theater's Three Sections:

Theatron: this section, the *theatron,* was for seating around 14,000 spectators; it was probably at first of wood, but later of stone. (The upper deck of seating was called the *epitheatron.*)

Orchestra: this circular area was for the chorus to sing and dance in and for the actors to interact, when their function was developed.

Skēnē: this was at first a tent-like structure that served as a scene-building, and it had a door for entrances and exits. *The Oresteia* requires one, though perhaps the earliest plays didn't.

Costume was important, too, because it could establish factors like status, gender, and age.

The chorus remained important in drama, especially in Aeschylus. At some point, a choregos (legend says it was "Thespis," hence actors are *thespians*) stepped forth and became the first actor, or answerer (*hypocrites*).

The composer was the first participant to turn choral celebration into what we call drama, with a plot and interaction between characters. Apparently, Aeschylus or Sophocles added a third actor. The former's early plays required only two actors, but even that was enough to make for interesting exchanges between the chorus and the actors and, to some extent, between the actors and each other. With three actors, the possibilities for dramatic dialogue and action are impressive.

Audience: The spectators would have consisted mostly of male citizens—the ones who ran Athenian democracy by participating in the Assembly. There would probably have been very few, if any, slaves or women present, and perhaps some resident aliens ("metics") and visiting dignitaries. Drama was surely a male-centered affair, as was the political life of Athens. Public speaking was vital in democratic Athens—anyone who was someone in the legal/political system needed to know how to move and convince fairly large numbers of men.

Theater and political life, as we shall see from Aeschylus, were in fact closely connected: the same skills were required, and the same class of people participated: male *kyrioi,* or heads of households who also performed military service.

So while the stuff of tragedy seems almost always to have been the ancient myth cycles, the audience watching the plays would have felt themselves drawn in by the dramatists' updating of

their significance for the major concerns of the fifth-century BCE present. And that present was, of course, the age of the great statesman Pericles (495-429 BCE), who drove home the movement toward full Athenian democracy from 461 BCE onward and who at the same time furthered a disastrous course of imperial protection-racketeering and aggression that had ensued from the Athenians' victory in the Persian Wars around 500 BCE.

Greek tragedy grew to maturity in the period extending from the battles of Marathon on land in 490 BCE and the naval engagement at Salamis in 480 BCE, on through the Second Peloponnesian War from 431-404 BCE, in which the Athenians lost to Sparta the empire they had gained during half a century of glory following the victories over Persia.

Athens's supremacy didn't last long as such things go, but it burned brightly while it lasted, and festival drama, along with architecture, sculpture, and philosophy, was among its greatest accomplishments. So the dramas took place in one of the most exciting times in Western history—times that were both exhilarating and unsettling at once, shot through with violence, democratic and artistic flourishing, victory, and heart-rending losses due to war and disease.

Tragic Masks: The masks tell us something about tragedy: with linen or clay masks, a single actor might play several roles, or wear several faces of the same character. In "The Critic as Artist, Oscar Wilde wrote, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." [6] His quip should remind us that masks don't discourage expression—as Kenneth McLeish says, they had religious significance in the theater: participants in Dionysian rites offered up their personal identity to the god, and further, he continues:

> Wearing a mask does not inhibit or restrict the portrayal of character but enhances it, allowing more, not less, fluidity and suppleness of movement; and the character created by or embodied in the mask and the actor who wears it can feel as if it has an independent identity which is liberated at the moment of performance—an unsettlingly Dionysian experience. [7]

I would like to point out that this emphasis on what we might call expression is important especially because—Aristotle's claims about plot being the soul of tragedy notwithstanding—not much happens in many Greek tragedies. Instead, chorus members and characters "take up an attitude" toward the few well-packaged, exciting events that transpire on or off the stage. The action is important, but the characters' words and attitudes help us, in turn, gain perspective on the action. Perhaps when Aristotle emphasizes plot so much, he's taking for granted the power of the Dionysian mask to support the plot in driving the audience toward *catharsis.* Character, in Aristotle's critical scheme, will reveal itself in relation to the play's action.

Aristotle's Theory of Tragic Drama: My Summary and Reflections

In Aristotle's view, a well constructed plot that follows probability and necessity will induce the proper tragic emotions (pity, *eleos* / ὁ ἔλεος and fear or terror, *phobos* / ὁ φόβος), with the result being *catharsis* (ἡ κάθαρσις) a medical term that may be interpreted as either "purgation" (of

audience emotion) or as "intellectual clarification." [8] These kinds of debate often turn contentious, but it makes sense to suggest that the tragic emotions, once aroused, quickly become the object of introspection. Thereafter, the audience attains clarification about an issue of great importance—for instance, our relation to the gods, the nature of divine justice, etc. That is one way to combine the best of both notions of *catharsis.* [9]

If the dramatist follows the precept that "plot is the soul of tragedy," the proper emotional effect should follow: the audience's pity and fear will lead them toward *catharsis.* The latter was a Greek medical term that had to do with purging the body by means of cutting a vein and "bleeding" the patient, but we can also interpret it to mean that a tragic play stirs up powerful feelings which it then renders harmless or enlists in the service of aesthetic reflection.

To extrapolate broadly, we may leave the theater emotionally purified and much clearer intellectually about our own nature as human beings, our place in the universe, and our relationship with the gods. Aristotle was a scientist, and he considered the arts intellectually significant: he suggested that *mimesis* (ἡ μίμησις, imitation, representation) is one of the main ways we learn things from the time we are children. Dramatic *mimesis* is a narrower species of representation in general, so in that sense it's continuous with life beyond the theater. [10]

We find in Aristotle, then, a view that says carefully structured dramatic works open a window to an important emotional and (possibly) intellectual experience, one that makes painful sights and stories worthwhile to see and reflect upon.

As for the precise nature of tragic insight, it varies from play to play. Aristotle knew that simply declaring a tragedy to be a play with an unhappy conclusion wasn't much of a description. If that's all there is to it, what should we do, then, with Aeschylus's *The Oresteia,* a trilogy [11] that ends in triumph for its remaining protagonist and glory for the city of Athens?

But to take a prominent example of a play that (if we leave aside the two sequel dramas that make it part of a trilogy: *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*) really does end badly for its protagonist, what is the nature of the insight gained in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King?* Surely the lesson isn't simply that you shouldn't kill your father and then sleep with your mother. Those are primal taboos.

Perhaps, then, we see the iron law of prophecy and divine sway brought home to us: Oedipus had tried to escape from a prophecy, but Apollo's words through his oracle catch up with him just the same. Even this admirably clever character cannot outwit his own fate, and his very strengths (intelligence and determination, self-sufficiency in the face of hardship) become the engines of his destruction. Or perhaps we come to understand the painful process of gaining insight into the nature of things and of ourselves. To our discomfiture, *Oedipus the King* tells us something about how we fit into a cosmic order presided over by difficult gods.

Another example would be Sophocles' *Antigone*—there are competing sets of laws and rights in the cosmos, as the Hegelian notion of tragic drama would tell us. [12] Antigone asserts familial piety (she wants to bury her slain brother), while Creon asserts his prerogative to be obeyed as a king

who had decreed it fitting to leave Antigone's brother unburied since the man had made himself an enemy to Thebes. Both are in their own context taking the moral high ground, so the situation thereby yields us the Hegelian notion of tragedy that pits incompatible rights against each other.

There doesn't seem, then, to be any one thing to learn from ancient tragedy, except perhaps that the world never works the way we want it to but instead has its own ways. Greek tragedy teaches us that (contrary to what Protagoras said) man is *not* the measure of all things. Humanity is certainly not the boss of the universe. We are caught up in nets of significance beyond our power to escape or perhaps even to understand fully, and the best we may be able to do is to seek clarity and maintain our dignity in the face of that harsh insight.

The Greeks consistently cared a great deal how we face up to a fate imposed upon us by forces beyond our control, a great deal what attitude we strike up in the face of disaster and, sometimes, divine indifference or even hostility. In tragedy, as Northrop Frye and others have said, it is death that gives meaning to life. The tragic art's form pays homage to a magnificent powerlessness: life only yields its full significance when we are on the verge of losing it. [13]

What good does "insight" do the protagonist (and us by implication) if consciousness is about to be extinguished and we won't be able to act upon our hard-won insight? That's a very human question, one we might suppose tragedy to ask but not to answer to everyone's satisfaction. Ultimately, the Greeks' sense for the dark side, for the gap between knowledge and power, for the vast distance between our need for intelligibility and security and the way the world and the gods treat us, may be their greatest artistic legacy.

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Endnotes

[1] See 13 Things about the Great Dionysia. Brown.edu. Accessed 1/28/2025. For the summary portions of the guide that follows, I have drawn liberally from Graham Ley's *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago Press, 1991, ISBN-10: 0226477606; a new version is dated 2007). The substantive comments on Aristotle from pg. 3 bottom to the guide's end are my own views.
[2] See "Reconstructing the Lenaia," by Peter Swallow, School of Classics, St. Andrews. The Post Hole. Accessed 1/28/2025.
[3] For a sample of dithyrambic music, listen to this audio performance by Petros Tabouris: Euripides' Bacchae. Accessed 1/28/2025.
[4] In Greek mythology, *satyrs* and *maenads* were, respectively, male and female "fertility spirits." See Theoi.com's entry Satyroi and Greek Mythology Link's entry Maenads. Accessed 1/28/2025. The satyr-plays that were staged after tragic presentations apparently involved performers taking on the role of satyrs in dialog, song, and dance. See this performance by the New York Euripides Summer Festival 2016.
[5] At www.ancientathens3D.com, view the south slope of the Acropolis … as well as same site's excellent video production "The Ancient Greek Theatre."
[6] Wilde, Oscar. "The Critic as Artist" from *Intentions*. Gutenberg e-text. Accessed 1/29/2025.
[7] McLeish, Kenneth. *Ibid.* 9.
[8] On the discussion about what we are to understand by *catharsis,* see the following two texts: Nussbaum, Martha. "Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10:107-159 (1992). And Nuttall, Anthony David. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. ISBN 978-0198183716.
[9] Character representation is secondary to action, Aristotle writes in *Poetics,* since we are happy or unhappy on the basis of the things we *do*. A good dramatist reveals character through action, not in isolation as if it were a person's inner essence. This seems largely true even of more modern playwrights such as Shakespeare, some of whose characters—Hamlet, most obviously, or Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV, Parts 1-2,* or Rosalind in *As You Like It*—are endowed with an interiority, an inner life, that does not easily reduce to their plays' action. On this notion of interiority, see Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.* Riverhead Books, 1998.
[10] The ancients didn't have an "art for art's sake" doctrine of the sort that arose in the European nineteenth century alongside the Industrial Revolution. The Greeks didn't insist that there should be a deep chasm between art and other kinds of experience.
[11] Most Greek tragic plays were part of trilogies, or sets of three plays. Nearly all of those sets have been lost, and we have only single plays. *The Oresteia* is a fortunate exception.
[12] Georg W. F. Hegel. This early-nineteenth-century German philosopher addresses tragedy in a number of his texts, but perhaps most insightfully in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics.* Trans. Bernard Bosanquet. Penguin Classics, 2004. ISBN-13: 978-0140433357.
[13] Frye, Northrop. *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy.* Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1967, repr. 1985. 3.