

# GREEK DRAMA

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## ORIGINS

Greek drama has its roots in the Athenian seasonal festivals honoring Dionysus; the date usually assigned to this era is around 700 B.C. Dionysus was the god of wine, as well as the god of fertility, and not surprisingly, these festivals were filled with drunkenness and sexuality. Some scholars believe that the Greeks patterned their celebrations after traditional Egyptian pageants in honor of Osiris, whose death and resurrection resembles the life-cycle of the grapevine, the wine god's symbol, which is severely pruned at the end of the season, lies dormant, but sprouts into new life each spring.

Usually these four festivals were performed during the first weeks of seasonal changes, the times associated with planting, tending the vine, harvesting, and wine-making: the Festival of Vintage (Rural Dionysia) in late December, the Festival of the Winepress (Lenaea) in early February, the Festival of Tasting (Anthesteria) in early March, and the Great Festival of Celebration (City Dionysia) in early April. These were natural times of festivity when people felt like singing, praying for good crops, giving thanks, and making sacrifices for bountiful harvests.

The core element in these early festivals seems to have been revelry. Drunken men often dressed up in rough goat skins (goats being noted for their sexual potency), donned fake phalluses, symbols of fertility, and sang and cavorted in choruses to imitate the capering of goats. A company of revelers welcomed Dionysus, whose entrance on an ornate float decked with vines commemorated the god's arrival from the sea. The goatlike frolicking of the local participants set the tone for the remainder of the festival. (The word "tragedy" literally means "goat song," from the Greek *tragos* and *ode*.)

As "goats," these Pan-like creatures, dressed like Dionysus' companions, would boast and bray about their potency, singing hymns to the glory of Dionysus. Fertility was important for good crops and the perpetuation of small city-states. To add to the atmosphere of

abundance, tradesmen sold honey and almond cakes, flat bread, chest-nuts, chickpeas, and broadbeans from roadside stands. Wine, the focus of the festival, flowed freely. Filmmakers have relished in depicting these colorful and lusty, wine-soaked orgies, but from all evidence, their films are pale imitations of the original excesses.

Despite the fact that there was much drinking and an abundance of raucous horseplay, however, there was also a serious and sacred dimension to these early, mystical, sacrificial dramas. The early choruses of fifty men, dancing in a circle, which was at first an earthen threshing floor and later a permanent altar of Dionysus, sang not only of fertility, but of the sorrow that comes with winter, the pruning of the grapevine, and death. They also sang of spring, the appearance of green shoots on the vine, and rebirth. Worshipping Dionysus, similar to the Christian observance of Lent and Easter, served as a kind of wish for immortality through the continuous cycles of birth and death and rebirth, the triumph of life over death.

The songs, which commemorated events in which Dionysus played a major role, were hymns—choral hymns, which took the form of chants, songs, paeans, and poems; they are usually referred to as dithyrambs. They began as extemporaneous devisings, but were replaced by traditional lines suited to the occasion. Eventually, a choral leader evolved; he recited lines alone and awaited an answer from the chorus. This theatrical development was the first dialogue. Later, an actor—separate from the chorus and the leader of the chorus—was added.

Around 534 B.C., ten years or so before Aeschylus' birth, Thespis, an Athenian from the borough of Icaria, traveled from village to village and organized local celebrations throughout Attica. He is usually credited with the introduction of the first actor, although some scholars insist that his successor, Phrynichus, deserves the credit. A character in the modern sense, the actor conversed with the chorus leader and with the chorus itself. In fact, he could take on several roles at different times during the intervals of choral singing. These early "dramas" soon became the first tragedies—for they focused on human matters; they were not merely songs or hymns to Dionysus.

According to Plutarch, the aging Solon disapproved of Thespis' diversions, which he considered "lies." However, his successor, Pisistratus, tyrant of Athens, declared a new festival, featuring "tragedies," elevating them in importance to the status of athletic contests. He

assigned the festival a permanent home, on a steep slope south of the Street of Tripods, where the Theater of Dionysus was consecrated. There is some reason to believe that it was Aeschylus who first wrote tragedy in the sense that the word is used today, with emphasis on content rather than on lyric or stylistic matters. The production of tragedy reached a great height of literary artistry under Aeschylus' successors, Euripides and Sophocles, giving Greece its "Golden Age."

It was during the fifth century B.C. that tragedy matured. Its technique was improved with the addition of more actors and a greater complexity of plot and theme until it evolved into the sophisticated literary form seen in the plays of Sophocles, near the end of the fifth century B.C. Thus, five hundred years before Christ, people congregated in amphitheaters to see dramas which were specifically written to be performed. The drunken spontaneity was gone, relegated to short, bawdy "satyr" plays, which were largely comic relief from the heavier tragedies. Almost always at these drama festivals, one could expect the tragedies to focus on vengeance, severe punishment, exile, or death. Early Greek myths, particularly those in which Athens was mentioned, usually served as the basis for the plots of the dramas.

The most prestigious of the drama festivals held in Athens was the City Dionysia, held over a six-day period. Throngs of visitors, dignitaries, and rural citizens crowded the city to see the spectacle, which represented a major aspect of religious worship. There were two processions, from Dionysus' temple to his sacred grove and back again, and public sacrifices were performed at his altar. A few days before the main performance, in a spot near the theater, the playwright offered a *proagon*, a preview of coming attractions to build enthusiasm.

On three successive mornings, three dramatists who had been selected competitively by the archon, or mayor, earlier that same year, each presented a tetralogy, consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play. The play began at sunrise and ended around noon. Audiences brought the essential ingredient—a willing suspension of disbelief—and sometimes ran from their seats in fright at the appearance of menacing figures, such as the Erinyes, or Furies. Yet, drawn into the illusion of dramatization, the playgoers followed the argument of each character and gravely weighed the evidence which the playwright presented in defense of his thesis. Attending the theater in fifth century Athens was serious business.

The state, which considered theater a form of public edification,

paid each actor's salary from public funds. The *choregos* or patron, usually a wealthy Athenian, considered it an honor to underwrite other production costs, including food for the cast. The actors provided their own costumes and masks, which often passed through generations of the same family and were repainted for each performance. At the close of the festival, ten judges, who had been chosen by lot, determined the winners and awarded prizes.

In contrast to tragedy, comedy developed from another aspect of the Dionysiac festival. Derived from *komos*, the Greek work for revel, comedies evolved from the mummery that accompanied processions. The townspeople along the parade route exchanged ribald witticisms with the young men who took part in the pageant, indulging coarse jest, mockery of notables, gossip, insults, and other forms of merrymaking. After Epicharmos formalized comedy for stage presentation in Megara during the second half of the sixth century B.C., comic plays came to resemble tragedies in format and structure. The audience, deeply involved in the satire, expressed their approval or dislike by shouting, booing, inserting asides with the dialogue, and even pelting the players with olives, fruit pits, nuts, and small stones.

Each performance of the City Dionysia ended with a comedy, rather like dessert after a full meal, but it was the *Lanaea* that showcased comedy as the entree around 442 B.C. Humor was heavily localized, lampooning local officials for their imperfections and commenting on embarrassing public situations and scandals. Because the drollery often got out of hand, officials eventually barred women from attending the *Lanaea*.

Officials, usually one in every wedge of seats, oversaw the behavior of the outspoken, often unruly audience. To assure order and guarantee a good performance, committees censored material that appeared on stage, excising both violence and licentious or profane language. It would seem that playwrights risked extreme criticism for small reward—usually a skin of wine and a basket of figs for the best comedy and a goat for the best tragedy. In actuality, however, the playwright commanded a respect in Athens unequalled by authors in more recent times, including Shakespeare.

Besides writing the plays and composing the accompanying music, of which we have no remnants, the poet-dramatist was responsible for directing the production, auditioning performers, and supervising rehearsals. Choreography, set to the music of flutes and stringed

instruments, was intricate, sometimes involving antiphonal choruses. Often, the dramatist acted the role of the protagonist, or central character, but this tradition seems to have stopped by Sophocles' time.

Because attendance was a civic and a 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 reimbursement for all citizens who could not afford the price. The seasonal festivals were so important to Greek life that everyone was encouraged to participate, including women, children, slaves, and prisoners, and all public and private business was suspended for the occasion. Although only thirty-three tragedies, eleven comedies, and one satyr play remain of the outpouring of creative talent, this representative sampling gives us enough of a glimpse to appreciate the birth of drama in the Western world.

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