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What Was Tragedy?

Definitions of Tragedy

When we use the word "tragedy" in ordinary conversation ("What a tragedy," or "how tragic!"), we may be referring to something that is merely sad. On reflection, however, most of us would agree that the word should be reserved at least for situations of great suffering; when it is used to speak of a death, that death should be early or exhibit "tragic waste." My students thought it was tragic when drunk driving led to the deaths of four students in one car at a nearby college; similarly, when five young people from one town in Maine died in a car crash, the community felt it was a tragedy.

In the course of our lives we often encounter grievous events, and we mourn them, using the word tragedy. We typically label terrifying acts of nature a tragedy: for instance, when a tsunami struck in Southeast Asia, it was widely called a tragedy. And six months later, not only were the events seen as a "most vivid manifestation of the globalisation of tragedy," but the reaction of the world was even called a *katharsis*, which, as we shall see, alludes to tragedy as well (*New Straits Times Press* [Malaysia] Berhad, June 26, 2005). War and other political events, such as the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, frequently summon up the word. And sometimes nature and political reactions combine to create a disaster of tragic proportions; in the case of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the winds and flooding caused the initial physical devastation, but the political and economic conditions led to more death and destruction and to the continued suffering of the storm's victims.

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Scholars typically distinguish this ordinary-language use of tragedy from the artistic form, locating tragedy not in such events but in their structuring into art, and in the audience response to that structure. Historically, tragedy has virtually boiled down to any serious drama—it is not comedy, although Chekhov confuses the issue when he calls his very serious and pessimistic plays "comedies." Many people, including most of my students, assume that a tragedy is a play that ends badly, and most often with death. Or, with more detail, they take tragedy to be the fall of an important person from a high place because of a flaw. The flaw is often interpreted as a deep error of character, generally pride.

Most elements of the basic definition my students look for (the fall of a person from a high place because of a flaw) come from slight misreadings of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a very brief and fragmentary treatise dating to the 330s. Although Aristotle was not contemporary with fifth-century tragedy, he had a great deal more evidence at his disposal than we do; at the same time, he also had his own philosophical perspective and cannot be taken as giving an objective or authoritative verdict on the subject. According to Aristotle, a tragedy is "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of those emotions" (6.2, trans. Butcher). Aristotle begins by contrasting tragedy with epic poetry, in which a single rhapsode, or singer, narrates a story rather than enacting it, but likens the two forms in that they both make men better than they are (in contrast to comedy) (1–3). Aristotle adds later that since tragedy imitates an action, there have to be actors (6.5), and they should imitate someone better, not worse, than the audience. For Aristotle, then, Greek tragedy centers on the story; the characters are there for the sake of the action, not vice versa. He further emphasizes two elements of the plot that make for tragedy: overturn or change in fortune and recognition (*peripeteia* and *anagnórisis*, 6.13), which dominate much later discussion of individual plays. Recognition is essential but painful in such plays as Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, where Oedipus blinds himself when he realizes who he is.

Crucially, in terms of common mis-understandings, tragedy does not have to have an unhappy ending to be successful for Aristotle, or for the Athenians in general: it is enough if something terrible almost

happens, but does not. The change or overturn can theoretically go in either direction—from bad to good, from good to bad fortune (though Aristotle acknowledges that it makes better drama in the latter case). Aeschylus' *Oresteia* ends with harmony, as his other trilogies might have done, though we don't know for certain because we have only single plays from the others. In the case of the plays written to stand alone, two of Sophocles' seven end well for some of the characters at least; and many tragedies by Euripides end well. His *Ion* depends on a recognition for the happy ending: a mother almost kills Ion but does not because she finds out that he is the baby she had born to the god Apollo, now grown up and working at the god's temple. In *Ion*, then, there is a positive *peripeteia* based on the *anagnôrisis* of the child's identity.

While Aristotle never says that the tragedy *must* involve a fall, he implies it when he says that in the best tragedies the tragic action should come about through some mistake of the character's own (10–11, 13.4). He uses *hamartia*, which comes from a word that also means missing the mark in archery; thus it is an error, not a character flaw and certainly not pride. Some small mistake that you make unleashes catastrophic consequences, and in some tragedies the mis-recognition of a family member is that mistake. Modern students and critics writing in the wake of Shakespearean drama often see pride as the error, and they look for evidence in Greek tragedy; people also mistakenly assume that the Greek concept *hubris* against the gods is the ancient equivalent for a modern (and Christian) notion of pride. For the Greeks *hubris* was problematic, but it was typically externalized in an arrogant or violent action and was not simply an attitude. Pride within bounds, not humility, was appropriate for the aristocratic Greek male in the heroic age who was the subject of tragedy; therefore, we have to be wary of importing Christian values into pagan times. We will discuss this further in the chapter on Greek religion and when we come to discuss Oedipus and his drama.

Aristotle's definition is for the most part formal, not emotional or political. However, he further points out that the best tragedies are based on a few families because they have done or suffered something terrible (13.5) and, contradicting his earlier theoretical position, says that they do end unhappily (13.6). Through the emphasis on myth and "purgation" (*katharsis*) of pity and fear, he opens the way to a discussion of the emotions in tragedy.

What Did It Do?

What was the function of tragedy—to teach or entertain or both? Aristotle's view was undoubtedly developed as part of a conversation with his teacher Plato. Plato is dismissive of artists in general on the grounds that they simply imitate physical reality; his philosophy of the "forms" holds that these "ideal" versions are "real," while everyday reality is an imitation of these abstractions. Art, then, is an imitation of an imitation, and consequently worthless, or even pernicious. Plato argues that the arts are not educational, as they were generally thought to be; he attacks poetry, in particular, because it represents the gods as quarreling, and is thus misleading. He goes further in his attack on tragedy: it encourages self-pity by leading its audience to feel pity for the characters, and makes the actors womanish (*Republic* 3.395D–E). His point is that society should not nurture such behaviors (*Republic* 10.606b). The citizens and especially the leaders of a city should be trained to be strong and reasonable, not emotional; since the arts in general and tragedy in particular create a pernicious emotional response, they should be banned. To sum up Plato's view: poetry (epic or tragic) does not give access to the truth; thus, it has nothing to teach and does not deserve its reputation and high status. The poets may be inspired, but they are not teachers. Plato grants that we learn by imitation, but he argues that tragedy does not provide good models for the audience to imitate.

Plato's philosophy of education and art is countered by Aristotle in the *Poetics*; by asserting that tragedy is the imitation of an action, he avoids the suggestion that the plays are merely third-rate (compared to reality and the ineffable forms). For Aristotle, tragedy as mimesis is a reenactment, not a bad copy of something else. The reenactment can be positive, because the action imitated is a serious or weighty matter; thus, it is important. The experience of watching a play is educational because people instinctually imitate and learn by imitating. Aristotle argues that tragedy is also pleasurable because human beings by nature take pleasure in works of imitation (4.2). Furthermore, he claims a philosophical status for tragedy. It points out general truths, the sort of thing that might happen (9.1–4), and is thus more philosophical than history.

The tragic emotions that Aristotle names are pity and fear. He counters Plato's claim about the destructiveness of the emotions (especially pity) by asserting that the audience is not left with those

emotions raging in its breasts because tragedy effects a *katharsis* of those emotions (6.2, 14.2–3). *Katharsis* is a much-debated term, and we are not sure what it means in this context. While its dictionary definition is "purification," it can refer to physical (a purgative) as well as spiritual cleansing. If there is no implication that the audience requires ritual purification, perhaps we can think of this as the stimulating of emotion and the emptying out of it. The audience, then, would be "wrung out" by watching tragedy, leaving the theater not in the heightened state of the crisis but in the calm that follows. We can envision this process as analogous to the difference between actual suffering in life and the artistic representation of suffering in which we can learn from someone else's pain instead of going through it. Aristotle no more than Plato holds that the emotion is good in and of itself, but the experience of *katharsis* means that tragedy can produce the rational citizen Plato maintains is desirable for the state. We feel pity and fear for the characters in the story, but because of the universal nature of tragedy, and because we understand that the actors are like ourselves, we understand that what happens to them might happen to us (on pity and fear, see also Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.5.1382b25, II.8.386a). The Aeschylean phrase "learning through suffering" (*pathei mathos, Agamemnon* 177) can therefore be taken to apply to Greek tragedy as a whole.

For both Aristotle and Plato, tragedy is an aesthetic object that has as its goal the arousal of emotion, but they differ in that for Aristotle tragedy is also educational. In *Frogs* (405), the comic playwright Aristophanes shows clearly the dominant view that tragedy is both instructive and entertaining, though of course everything in a comedy is potentially being played for laughs. In the play, Dionysos is starved for good poetry; as a result, he has gone down to the realm of the dead (Hades) to bring Euripides back to life. While in Hades he is asked to judge a contest between Euripides and Aeschylus to determine who is the best writer (Sophocles declines to participate because he is content where he is). Aristophanes' Chorus links Euripides' cleverness to that of Socrates, and contrasts it to the "high serious matter of tragic art." After much repartee, which highlights Aeschylus' impenetrable verse and Euripides' novelty and excessively democratic tendencies, Dionysos chooses Aeschylus because he has done the poet's duty—injected virtue into the people—and has the wisdom necessary to save the state. On the one hand, tragedy seems to be visceral; it fills a need as food or sex does since Dionysos was hungry for it, and the

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play opens with jokes about food and sex. But, on the other hand, the tragic poet's function is to educate the citizens. It remains to be seen whether or in what ways both these things are true. How do our emotions and our intellect interact in the experience of spectatorship or reading?

Where Did It Come From?

Classics is not, as the name would seem to imply, a fixed and static field but one in which practically everything is debated, especially when it comes to the origins of tragedy. Even the meaning of the word *tragôidia*, which gives us tragedy, is the subject of disagreements: it has something to do with a goat (*tragos*) and song (*oidos*), but how the two parts are connected is not clear. It might have been a song sung over the sacrifice of a goat, or a song for a goat prize, or the singing of a goat chorus. Whatever is said about the origins of tragedy is conjectural. Aristotle gives many bits of "information" in the *Poetics*; he first states that the Dorians claimed that tragedy developed in their regions, the Peloponnese, citing as evidence the fact that the word "drama" has its origins in their word for doing, *dran* (3.3). He also says that tragedy came from those who "led off" the dithyramb (4.12), but he later mentions that tragedy was initially "satyr-like," or satiric, and not elevated in tone (4.14). Both satyr drama and dithyramb remained elements of the festival in historical times, and Aristotle might have been hypothesizing as to why, not simply giving us the facts.

We have references to tragic performances in the sixth century, with Arion, a Corinthian named by Herodotus, and Thespis, named by Aristotle as the first to separate himself from the chorus and deliver a prologue and a set speech. One tradition dates Thespis to 534, in what would be the earliest contest, but it is increasingly popular to take a later date, 502, for the beginning of the competition (see also Chapter 2). In any event, the earliest play that we have is Aeschylus' *Persians* (472).

The texts that have come down to us are also less than secure. Just to give you some idea of the difficulties: our earliest manuscripts date from the tenth or eleventh century, though we can with other sources get reasonably close to what would have been texts from the third

century. However, it is not at all clear that those texts represent what was actually performed in the fifth-century contests. In the early years of tragedy, Greek society was in a transition between an oral and written culture; books were not widely available until the end of the fifth century. People, including the actors, learned through memorization. The importance of memory in education continued into late antiquity; students learned poems and speeches by heart, and it is said that Alexander the Great could recite whole speeches from Euripides' plays. In a story that is not necessarily accurate but that is nonetheless significant about the power of tragedy, Athenians taken prisoner after their failed attempt to conquer Sicily gained their freedom by reciting Euripides (Plutarch, *Nicias* 29).

The festivals continued into the fourth century; while new plays were written, tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were also produced as "revivals," which made it almost inevitable that there would be changes to the plays as a result of actors' interpolations, for example. The texts were not firmly established until around 330, when Lykurgus, an Athenian politician, passed a law that required the preparation of an official version for re-performance; these texts were, however, based on what was already an amalgam of written and oral material. And even those manuscripts had to be recopied, since they were written on papyrus and thus were highly perishable; as a result, the process of unintentional change continued until the invention of paper.

To make matters more difficult, the original manuscripts did not have divisions between words, and there were no assignments of lines to one speaker or another; these issues would have been resolved by the actors and directors in performance, and analyzing the texts to see what was original and what was added later has been the work of philologists since antiquity. The ancient scholars left notes in the margin (called *scholia*) which form the basis of much critical debate. The plays themselves did not necessarily have titles affixed to them by the playwright: how would it change our view if *Agamemnon* were called *Clytemnestra*? When we read a text, especially in translation, all of these questions will have been answered for us, and unless there are ample footnotes, we don't even realize the work of scholarly production by philologists that has gone into the book we hold in our hands. And of course, each editorial decision is also an act of interpretation, as this passage from an ancient commentary on Sophocles' *Ajax* 354 makes

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clear: "for in places where the roles are unclear, one should guess at the character, and make a distinction accordingly" (Csapo and Slater 31).

How Were the Plays Performed?

Despite Aristotle's claims that the spectacle is the least important aspect of the tragedies, and that even hearing the story should elicit the tragic emotions of pity and fear, Greek tragedy was written to be performed. To state the most important points: it had a conventional, not realistic, aesthetic. There were at the most three actors, all men, who performed in masks; they were accompanied by a chorus of twelve to fifteen men who sang and danced, also masked (see Figure 2). The set had only the most basic markers of place. The audience, then, was

Figure 2. Attic red-figure column-krater with a chorus of youths raising a figure from a tomb. (Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, Inv. BS 415. Photo: Andreas F. Voegelin.)

accustomed to using its imagination and to reading the codes of mask and gesture.

Performances began at dawn; in some of the plays, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the dawn is remarked upon, and it would have been real; similarly Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* speak of what has happened the night before. People might have started arriving during the night if they came from far away in Attica. We might think of lining up for tickets to a rock concert, or for some festival without reserved seating. The festival lasted for five days, and each was a massive all-day affair; people in the audience typically ate and drank during the performances. Therefore, we should not imagine a hushed space. The audience was an active participant, not a passive one.

The plays were first performed outdoors, in daylight, for a large audience (estimates vary, between 6,000 and 14,000). The backdrop was the city of Athens (Figures 3 and 4). Unfortunately, not much can be said with assurance about the physical fifth-century theater because of subsequent changes (see Figure 5); many images that we have in our minds come from the theater at Epidauros, which is from the fourth century. The Greek word *theatron*, from which we get our "theater," has as its primary significance "seeing," and the audience members were spectators. Yet, as some argue, the voice of the actors was more useful for audience comprehension because of the distance between actors and audience. The importance of sound is evident in Aristophanes, as well as in Plato's and Aristotle's discussions of tragedy; and we hear that Sophocles gave up acting his own plays because his voice was not strong enough (*Life* 4). Even if this story is not literally true, it does indicate that the ancients believed a powerful voice to be crucial.

We have only a few stones left from the original theater on the Akropolis. We know that there was a space for dancing (called the orchestra) and a building (called the *skênê*, from which we get our "scene") in front of which details of location could be indicated, and into which actors could go in order to change costume (or role), or simply to indicate that they were going indoors. Sophocles is also credited with beginning the practicing of painting on the *skênê*. We do not know if there was any form of stage, although if there was one, it was not the high version we are familiar with in the western theater today. The first theater for the purposes of play production was built of wood in 500. Though recent arguments from archaeology favor a roughly rectangular shape for the orchestra and auditorium, as it was

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AGORA 1 - 15
1. Stoa of the Herms
2. Royal Stoa
3. Stoa of Zeus
4. Apollo Patrous
5. Metroum
6. Tholus
7. ?Office of the Generals
8. Middle Stoa and Civic Offices
9. Odeum
10. Bema
11. Monopterus
12. Basilica
13. Altar of the Twelve Gods

14. Temple of Ares
15. Monument of Eponymous Heroes
AKROPOLIS 16 - 25
16. Propylaea
17. Erechtheum
18. Old Temple
19. Precinct of Zeus Polieus
20. Heroum of Pandion
21. Parthenon
22. Chalcotheke
23. Precinct of Artemis
24. Temple of Nike
25. Theater of Herodes Atticus

Figure 3. Plan of Athens. (Nicholas G. L. Hammond, ed., *Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1981.)

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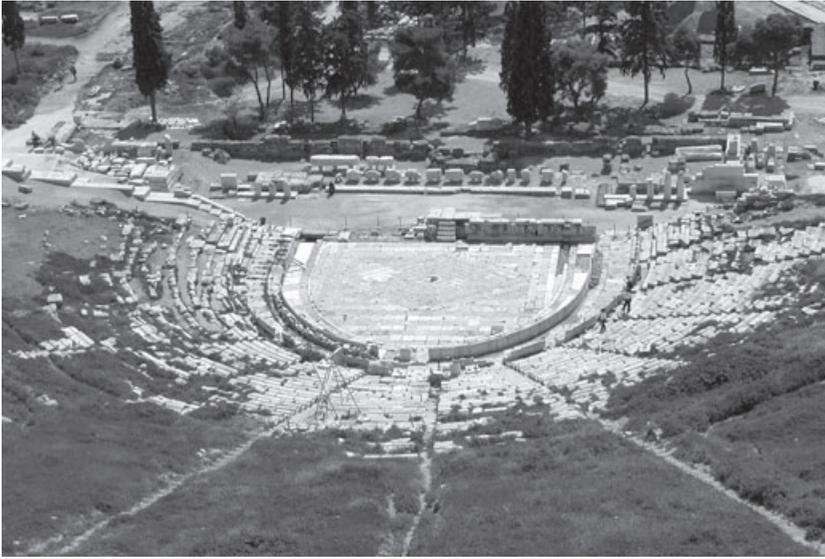
Figure 4. Theater of Dionysos (© Michael Palis/istockphoto.com.)

in the deme theater of Thorikos (Figure 6), others think it was circular, as it was in the later theater at Athens (Figure 5). Like the question of origins, this issue has ideological significance. For instance, if we emphasize the chorus and hypothesize a circular playing area, we can retain "the traditional idea of a democratic Athenian community gathered in a circle in order to contemplate itself in relation to the fictive world of the play" (Wiles 1997: 52). The circle theory sees corroboration in the notion of a round threshing floor, as well as from lines in the *Iliad* (18.590ff.); thus, it is related to assumptions about the connection between harvest and dance, between dance and chorus, between chorus and tragedy, as an evolved form. This way of thinking emphasizes the fact that the audience looks at one another, not on some individual leader; the shape of the auditorium is related to democracy, not tyranny. Other writers, however, disagree with one element or another of this correlation.

Entrances came either by way of the aisles leading in and around the stage building or from the stage building. The character coming on through one of these external entryways was visible to the audience for some time, which accounts for some of the less naturalistic lines of tragedy—entrances are announced by those on stage as the charac-

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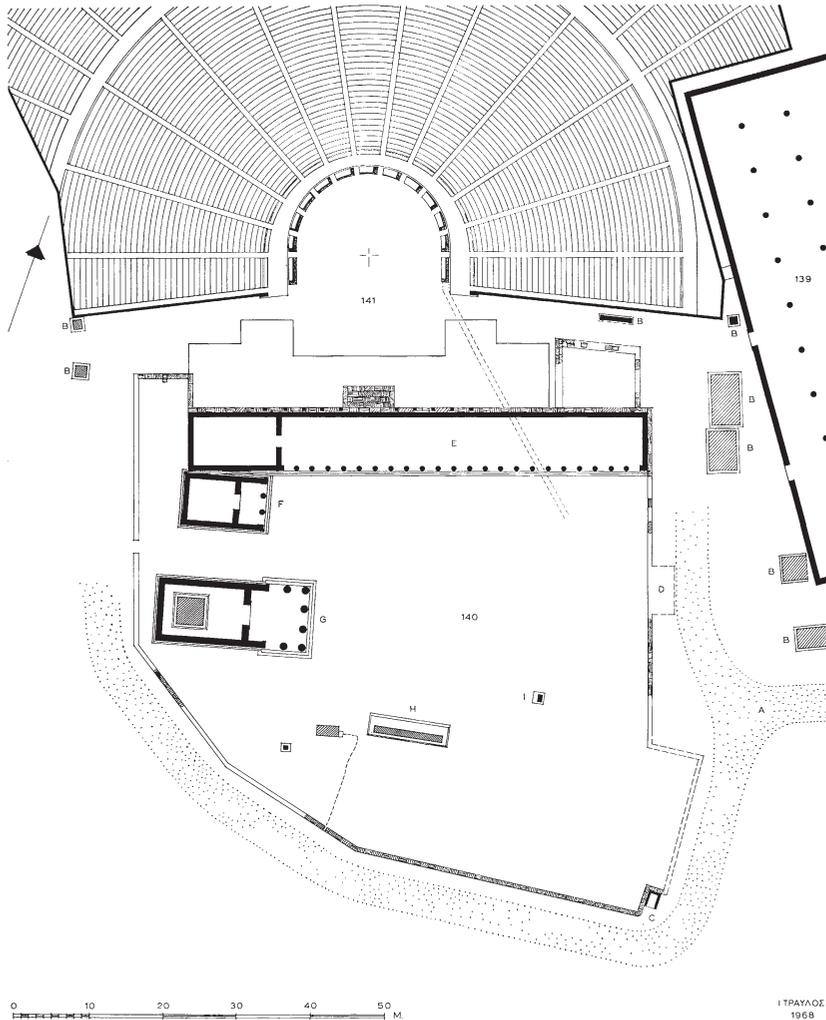
678 Restored plan. 139. Odeion of Perikles – 140. Shrine of Dionyso – 141. Theatre of
Dionysos –A. Street of the Tripods – B. Choregic monuments – C. Poros naiskos
– D.   Probable site of the propylon – E. Doric stoa – F. Earlier temple of
Dionysos – G.   Later temple of Dionysos – H. Great altar – I. Small altar.

Figure 5. Restored plan of the fifth-century theater of Dionysos. (John Travlos, *A
Pictorial Dictonary of Ancient Athens*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971; p. 541)
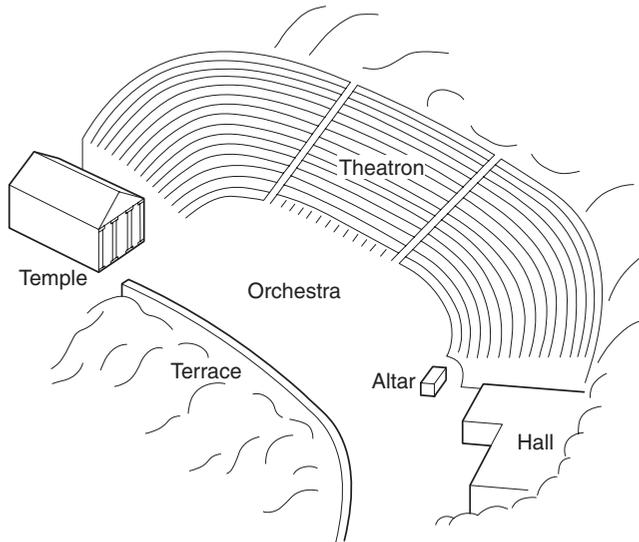
Figure 6. Pre-fifth-century deme-theater at Thorikos. (Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allan, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004; p. 37)

ter is walking on. The characters coming out of the stage building were imagined as coming out from the household or shrine. Other elements of stagecraft include the famous *ekkyklêma*, a wheeled platform, which allowed what had transpired inside to be shown to the audience and other characters. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the Queen, Clytemnestra, kills her husband, Agamemnon, and his lover, Kassandra, inside, but then they are rolled out, so that she can gloat over the bodies to the Chorus (and to the theater audience); in the second play of the trilogy, her son Orestes kills her and her lover, and their bodies are similarly revealed. The use of this technical device allows the playwright to make an explicit parallel between mother and son. Actors also used the stage building and could stand on it; there was a crane-like machine that could hoist them up (the *mêchanê*). We presume that it was used to reveal the gods who often end plays, thus the Latin phrase *deus ex machina*. Euripides uses this machine for the entrance of his eponymous heroine at the end of his play *Medea*, thereby emphasizing her divine origins.

It is very important to remember that this art form, like other poetry of the period that was written for a festival setting, was not individual but collective. To the best of our knowledge, tragedy developed out

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of a choral performance, not with the actors. Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that tragedy began with a satyr chorus that danced (see Figure 1). Moreover, the poets who won the honor of producing plays at the Athenian festival of the god Dionysos were said to have been "granted a chorus." Similarly, the prize for director/author went to the "teacher of the chorus." The choral odes dominated in early tragedy. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is largely choral, and he made the chorus the center in other plays, e.g., his *Suppliants*. Choral songs remained important even in Euripides, though they were less integrally related to the action in his later tragedies.

In many plays, the choral songs are metrically matched, so that a pair of stanzas would balance one another (sometimes denoted by the terms strophe and antistrophe); the poetic meter would have set a rhythm for the choral dance. Each pair of stanzas might end with an epode, metrically different from the strophic pairs but related to the other epodes. Strophic pairs may relate to one another not only in meter but also in terms of meaning, providing the reader with a guide to interpretation. But as with any general statement, we must be sensitive to nuance; different playwrights used these techniques differently. Euripides especially contributed many stylistic innovations, and, as I have mentioned, in his plays the odes are often less tightly connected to the overall meaning of the tragedy.

Because the meter varied, it could be expressive of mood, speeding up to indicate anxiety or lengthening syllables to imitate mourning and lament, for instance. The music and dance, integral parts of the performance tradition, have been almost entirely lost (we have fragments of music from two of Euripides' plays, but we don't know what the notes sounded like). We think that the chorus probably mimed what it was singing, which would have undoubtedly increased the intensity of the experience for the audience. They danced to the music of pipes, which would have added another register to the voices, perhaps making it possible to represent women's tonality. In addition, the importance of music and dance throughout the culture would have provided a point of contact for the original audience, who would most likely have participated in choruses at some point in their lives. The men would have been accustomed to the role of song in military activity—for instance, pipes also kept the beat for the crews on warships. Moreover, the pipes had strong associations with lamentation as well, making them particularly suitable for tragedy. Finally, for the Greeks, music (not the lyrics) was seen to have ethical coloring and to move

its listeners. Participation in these and other choruses was educational. Thus music was part of the pedagogical force of the plays, not a contradiction to that effect.

Students sometimes assume that the chorus gives "background information," and they may, but that is not a generalization that holds good for all Greek tragedy. In fact, the chorus fulfills multiple purposes; it could both articulate general truths of the culture and take on an individualized character. In each play, the chorus has a personality and position of its own and a role to play in the action, though it differs in importance from play to play. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* there is a chorus of elders; perhaps as a result of their age, they possess great knowledge and connect the action to important cultural themes, but they are specifically portrayed as *impotent* old men. Therefore, they are incapable of intervening and preventing the murder of the king.

The choral songs typically punctuate the action, separating episodes where the actors dominate, but the chorus could also interact with the actors. It may comment on the action, and its reactions must be taken into consideration as we try to understand what the ancient audience would have thought. But we must be cautious in assuming that the chorus is representative of the audience since it is typically not enacting Athenians. Then, too, the chorus may participate in a sustained scene with the actors. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* the Chorus prays with Elektra to the dead Agamemnon in what is known as a *kommos* (a word that also means lament or dirge).

The Greek word for actor (*hypokritês*) literally means the one who responds, answers, or interprets, that is, he answers the questions of the chorus or perhaps interprets the myths. As I said at the outset, there were never more than three actors with speaking parts in tragedy, and the actors were all men, as were the choristers. One consequence of this convention or rule is that an individual actor had to be prepared to represent more than one character, and often more than one gender, in any given play and certainly in the course of the festival. As a result of its use of male actors, cross-dressing thus a central part of Greek drama (tragedy, comedy, and satyr drama). Recent work on theater has emphasized the importance of transvestism as a crucial aspect of the imaginative work of performance; playing the "other" gender is the essence of mimesis. As we will discuss further (Chapter 3), there is ritual significance in this gender-fluidity of tragedy. There is considerable debate as to how much the actor strove for an accurate imitation

and remaining in character, and how much he strove to be recogniz-
able as himself. As some emphasize, there was a version of a star system
in effect: after 449 there was a prize established for the best actor, and
therefore perhaps a premium for the actor in being seen through the
role. We do not know what made an actor the best, however, and
recognizability might not have been an essential ingredient. Aristo-
phanes' comedy *Women of the Thesmophoria* makes it explicit that a
male actor would try to imitate a woman's voice, and, therefore, not
sound like himself.

The actors' language was no more ordinary speech than the chorus',
but it was in a meter that was more similar to the rhythms of everyday
language. We expect naturalistic or realistic patterns of conversation
in our film and theater. In Greek tragedy, there are either long speeches
in which one character responds to another (*Medea* is a very good
example of this kind of presentation), which become contests between
the characters in some plays, or there are sections in which the char-
acters rapidly exchange lines (*stichomythia*). No one interrupts, no one
loses his or her train of thought, and only very rarely do characters
contradict themselves. In the last third of the fifth century, more
singing was required of the actors, another element of loosening the
constraints as tragedy developed.

Given the size and outdoor setting of the theater, audibility and
visibility would have been critical concerns. The physical setting and
masking would have consequences for the style of acting, which would
have been very different from the intimacy, say, of film, where we can
catch the slightest whisper. Speakers would tend to face front or risk
losing the audience. Gestures would have to be clear since small ges-
tures would be missed by an audience at a distance. We can find many
hints about the action in the language, which seems to have cued the
audience as to what it was supposed to be seeing. It is clear that there
was a shared code of behavior in life that could be utilized in a play:
bowing the head in mourning or touching the chin or the knees in
supplication.

It is often noted that there is no violence enacted in Greek tragedy,
and in general violent actions did take place out of sight. As a result,
in order to inform the audience of what has happened, we have the
ubiquitous messenger speech. The disaster that has struck the Greek
army returning from Troy is reported by a messenger in Aeschylus'
Agamemnon, and similarly, in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, a
messenger tells the heroine, Deianeira, what is happening elsewhere.

The messenger can be deceitful, as in the latter case, or can be reluctant to articulate such horrors as he has seen (*Oresteia*, *Medea*). The messenger, as an outsider looking on at the violence, may to some extent model the audience's response. Thus, Talthybios in Euripides' *Trojan Women* has tears in his eyes at the death of Astyanax, the last remaining Trojan male. The convention enables the playwright to have his cake and eat it too: the physical violence is eliminated, but the emotional reaction is enacted (assuming that the messenger mimes as well as reports). However, it is also possible that the music and dance of the choral portions were in fact violent. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, there are fifty women who are almost raped by fifty men. The language of the chorus would have been sung with accompanying actions and would have been very exciting indeed.

The aesthetic as a whole was non-realistic and conventional, as we can see from the emphasis on the chorus, the limited number of actors, staging practices, etc. The masks are an important part of that formalism. They don't seem to have had exaggerated features, though the mouth had to be open enough to allow for the projection of audible voice; the human mouth would have been visible behind the mask. But they represented a typology of characters and were not individualized (so, young/old female, young/old male; barbarian/Greek). Thus Kreon in *Antigone*, Oedipus in *Oedipus*, and Theseus in *Hippolytos* share common tendencies toward arrogance, symptomatic of the fifth-century view of the tyrant. The rulers might have been represented by similar masks. In keeping with the masked dimension, introspection and psychological motives are not characteristic of the plays, but this does not mean that we give up all concern for consistency of character. A modern tendency toward psychological interpretation must be moderated in dealing with ancient plays; we are, however, encouraged to psychologize in some cases—for instance, the Chorus of the *Agamemnon* announces the change in Agamemnon (218), and Clytemnestra in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* remarks that her daughter was always "father-loving" (638).

Costume reveals a salient feature of tragedy, its combination of antiquated and what was then contemporary. The scenes on the Pronomos vase show actors, some from a satyr drama, but the detail is revealing. We see that the actors' costumes (Figure 1) are highly decorated but are more or less like fifth-century attire; they would not have seemed unfamiliar to the audience. Their long sleeves might have been a way of disguising male arms in female characters. In keeping with

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tragedy's high tone, aristocratic characters are lavishly attired, leading Aristophanes to mock Euripides for his habit of bringing on ragged heroes (in his *Elektra* the heroine repeatedly complains about her déclassé clothing). In modern times, directors have to decide how they will approach this problem—which "now" will be represented. Will the dress be modern, or if ancient, what version will be adopted? Peter Meineck (2004) staged a version of *Agamemnon* neither in the present nor in the distant past but in the fifties, so that World War II would be in the background and women's roles would have been more constrained than they were in 2004. Clytemnestra's dress was an important element in conveying that flavor.

In stressing that the aesthetic of tragedy was "conventional," I am not saying that it did not maintain an illusion of reality that the audience shared. The audience was only infrequently (if at all) made aware of the author behind the actor, and we have reason to believe that the actions and objects were realistic, not strictly symbolic; nonetheless the maintenance of the illusion did not require the imitation of everyday life. Moreover, the conventions were not rigid rules; the number of actors and the use of mythic subjects were not absolutes and should not be seen as too tightly controlling the playwrights. Tragedy changed over time–for instance, the number of actors grew from one to three. There were different versions of many of the myths, and the playwrights were free to modify them (as we will see in more detail in Part II). It is more productive to ask how the tragedians used these conventions rather than assuming that they could not deviate from them or manipulate them creatively.

So far we have amplified certain basics: Greek tragedy was presented outdoors in daylight as part of a competition in an Athenian festival honoring the god Dionysos; the plays, usually on a mythic subject, were enacted by choruses who sang and danced and three (at most) actors who spoke in verse. All the participants were men, and all wore masks which emphasized the role not the individual character. The current experience of going to the theater is radically different in practically every respect: we go inside, sit in a darkened auditorium, and look at a stage; in our dominant realistic aesthetic, we expect to see costumes and sets that represent the time and place of the action, and the actors represent the characters' "psychological truth." The Greeks combined music, dance, high art, and popular appeal into one art form, whereas in our own day these elements are divided. We have to turn to musicals and opera to give us the sense of the formal

multiplicity of tragedy, to rock concerts or sporting events to give us the sense of mass appeal and the outdoor experience. The form of Greek tragedy is what was most distinctive about it, yet it is for the stories that we return to the plays over and over again; we shall focus on that dimension in the next chapters, but most extensively in Part II. In order to better understand the ancient performances, in the next two chapters we will look in greater detail at the political and religious contexts shaping them.

Suggestions for further reading

For a recent consideration of tragedy in general and the dilemmas modern liberals face, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) is a classic consideration of modern tragedy.

On Aristotle and Plato, see Gerald Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968; Anchor, 1969); and M. S. Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

For the sources on performance and history, see Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals of Athens,* revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) and Eric Csapo and William J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

On the shape of the theater, see, in addition to David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). The arguments are well summarized by Scott Scullion, *Three Studies in Athenian Dramaturgy* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1994); see also his contribution to *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

On performance and internal stage directions, see Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978); Wiles (*Tragedy in Athens*) offers a contrasting view.

On "The Historical Moment" of tragedy, between myth and contemporary Athens, see the chapter by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his co-authored book with Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), pp. 23–8.

On the actor, see Paulette Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976); in English, there is a recent

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collection of essays, P. E. Easterling and Edith Hall, eds., *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

On music, see Martin L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Andrew Barker, ed., *Greek Musical Writings*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–9).

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