

GREEK DRAMA

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Drama and the other arts Drama is one of the three vivid vehicles for a culture's literary self-expression. Epic is the master vehicle, in which the society takes a panning shot of its whole breadth, and tries to name it; lyric is the mode in which the individual says what the culture is like from his or her small corner; drama is the vehicle for presenting the essential conflicts and interpersonal relations that constitute a social whole. The ancient Greeks excelled in all three vehicles of cultural expression: drama, for them, was the art-form in which the people as a whole were most robustly brought together.

Remains of Greek drama Four tragedians and one comic author are the principle makers of Greek drama—which is to say, of course, that the partial remains of those four masters hugely outnumber those of their many competitors, whose texts are left to us in only scattered fragments.

Aeschylus Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) represents the earliest stage of classical drama, simplest in the uses of chorus and actors—both stripped down—and most archaic in the use of the inherited mythical material that formed the substance of Greek tragedy. In his finest work the themes of revenge, reconciliation, and the struggle for justice receive unrivalled treatment.

Sophocles Sophocles (497-406 B.C.), like Aeschylus, is left to us in only a few plays, seven in each case. While Aeschylus reached into archaic themes, and did so with relatively archaic ritual staging, Sophocles added a second actor to the stage, and dealt with themes—the tragic irony of fate; honor and madness, pride and isolation—which inevitably strike us as more 'modern' than the themes of Aeschylus; modern in the sense of generated by a more complex social situation, in which reflection onto the older values of, say, the world of Homer, is bearing fruit in historicism.

Euripides Euripides (480-406 B.C.) is represented today by some seventeen remaining dramas, and by a modernist achievement which shatters the classical sheen of his two great tragedian predecessors. (He was almost a generation younger than Sophocles.) He opens his text to the problems of his contemporary world, still using but now totally reshaping the fund of classical myths on which his predecessors focused. The issues of women's rights and injustices, of psychological deviance, or of madness acquire attention alongside brilliant studies of selflessness (*Alcestis*) or revenge (*Hecuba*.)

Aristophanes Aristophanes (444-385 B.C.) is the only comic playwright of whom we have significant knowledge. Eleven of his plays remain, and with them a vivid reminder of the Athenian tastes for broad humor, political satire, and sharp social critique. Among other themes weighing on Aristophanes are those of political corruption, the elusive nature of peace, and the absurd pretensions of philosophers and lawyers. There is no mistaking the milieu or warfare, dirty politics, and social turmoil in which Aristophanes wrote.

Readings

Konstan, David, *Greek comedy and ideology*, Oxford, 1995.

Gregory, J., *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, 2005.

Discussion questions

Which of the three Greek tragedians, remaining to us, seems to you most available for reading today? Whom can you understand? Who is discussing issues that matter to you?

Sophocles, partly thanks to the views of Aristotle in the *Poetics*, is traditionally considered the 'greatest' Greek tragedian. Can you see why that case might be made? Would you accept that view point?

Comedy, it is often said, relies on a background of stable social norms, and on ridicule of those who break the norms. Does this account apply to the comedy of Aristophanes?

Aeschylus

Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.). In seven extant dramas, produced in the first half of the fifth century B.C., the playwright Aeschylus takes us from the mythical imagination of the epic tradition into mimetic action aimed to engage the newly self-directing democracy of Athenian citizens. We move squarely into the world of the *dramatic imagination*.

Greek drama and the dramatic imagination. We may seem to be hurtling from one form of imagination to another, and from one time period of antiquity to another. And in fact that is what we are doing. Why? We want to display, above all, the stunning richness of the expressive powers of the Hellenic literary mind. To this point we have glanced at the epic, philosophic, and lyric imaginations—diverse as they are even within themselves—and can say of them all that they are the creations of virtual worlds, the world of vast epic story tale, the speculation of the mind on the nature of the world, the expression of the self in its inmost feelings. When we come to the drama, however, the realm of what Aristotle first spoke of as 'bodies in motion,' we are in a fresh new cross between 'reality' and 'fabrication.' We are thus impacted with a direct power unknown to other genres of literature! Where did this genre come from?

The origins of Greek tragedy. Unlike epic and philosophy, though not unlike the lyric, Greek tragedy seems to have grown out of dance and choral music. While the fifth century is the great period for both tragedy and comedy, there was an Archaic creative period, deep in the world of Hesiod's time, when rural/religious dance festivals, which mesh with the origins of lyric, began to create early forms of choral action. We see a form of this, not really a drama, in the celebratory paeans of Pindar. In the course of the sixth century, a first character or group spokesperson split off from the body of the dancers, and began to dialogue with them. This split-off figure became the first actor, and by century's end had been joined by a second actor. (Two actors plus chorus were the basic ingredients throughout the course of classical Greek drama, tragedy *and* comedy; but though we know such basics from our own observation, and from Greek commentators like Aristotle, we have only the sketchiest outlines of the sixth century developments that led to the great sophistication of fifth century tragedy.) We do know that significant theatrical structures were created during the sixth century B.C., and that by the time of Aeschylus the Theater of Dionysus served as a centerpiece of Athenian municipal life, built against the slopes of the Acropolis, and drawing to it large crowds on the occasion of major religious festivals.

Now back to Aeschylus. Aeschylus is the first classical dramatist we know, a writer of great vision and depth of human understanding, who took the choral-actor ingredients of the sixth century drama, and powerfully raised the expressive power of drama, as well as enriching the on-stage relationship between the chorus and the main, and eventually a second, actor. Though we have only seven remaining plays, out of some ninety he wrote, those works span a twenty-five year period during which Greek drama was evolving at a meteoric rate, and give us a perspective onto the whole genre. The oldest remaining play of Aeschylus, *The Persians* (472 B.C.), concerns the defeat of Xerxes in the Persian Wars, and (remarkably) puts itself empathetically inside the minds of the pitifully defeated Persian widows. Of the remaining Aeschylean plays we will this week read *The Oresteia* (458 B.C.), the only intact Greek trilogy, a three-play unit involving a climactic engagement with a single mythical theme.

The Theme of the Oresteia. The three plays of the *Oresteia* (that is, the tale of Orestes, son of Agamemnon) are based on themes from Greek mythology, and like most Greek tragedies form what the Greeks called 'slices from Homer's banquet.' In the first of these plays the Greek leader of the War against Troy returns home, his concubine with him, to find a furious wife (and her lover) and to be slain by her

outraged son Orestes. In the second play, which would be watched on the second day of the display of Aeschylus' work in the annual competition, we see Orestes paying the price for his unholy mother-murder, and the Erinyes, hag-like spirits of divine revenge, assaulting Orestes and driving him crazy. In the final play the Gods, led by Athena, hold a trial of Orestes at the law court on the slopes of the Acropolis, and in a very close decision exonerate the murderer. This powerful, supra realistic, immensely metaphorical and verbally structured drama—one might almost say 'opera'—deals overwhelmingly with issues of revenge, justice, honor and law. May it be left to you, o student, to explore into the finer points of the meter, dance, costuming, and scenographia which generate this unique memorial to the Greek dramatic imagination.

Reading

Hughes, Ted, *The Oresteia of Aeschylus: A New Translation* (New York, 1999). (Read all seven of Aeschylus' plays, if possible!)

Discussion

Can you make personal sense of the last play of the *Oresteia*? (Maybe I am the only one struggling with this issue!). The movements and reactions of the characters, in the first two plays, seem sufficiently 'realistic,' if 'distanced' from the ordinary. But the last play turns out to be a divine law-drama. Why was this the appropriate conclusion for the trilogy? Do we face here some profound cultural difference from the Greek sensibility? Don't the gods come across as mere counters, vehicles of votes? (Remember the interplay of costume, stilted shows, megaphoned voices, all those details we have had to pass over quickly, but which are so essential to the makeup of the Greek drama! Should we view the last play of this trilogy as an oratorio?)

Sophocles

Sophocles as master dramatist. Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), often considered the greatest master of the Greek tragic form, died a half century after Aeschylus, leaving a legacy of seven extant dramas—well over a hundred plays in fragmentary condition, or simply ‘referred to’ by others-- and an unmatched record of successes in the annual theatrical contests at Athens. Sophocles competed in thirty annual competitions, and won twenty four-- defeating Aeschylus himself in more than one instance--while Aeschylus won fourteen times and Euripides, the third of the great tragedians extant to us, won only four times. (Yes, victory in these contests was a ‘popularity contest,’ but the fifth century Athenian theater goer, adult male citizens, was the central figure in a polity of unrivalled brilliance; no usual Broadway habitué, but heir to an already rich mythical/thematic tradition, and to a language which many centuries had by now polished.) You will see, this week, what was the ineffable secret of Sophocles’ greatness: his Olympian perspective, his intricate plots focusing on a single crucial event, his irony, and in the end, while retaining his skepticism about the universe, his granting to Fate a dignity, and spirit of justice, which ennoble even violent and beaten protagonists. We will read two plays, the early play *Antigone* (hard to date exactly) and the mature *Oedipus the King* (401 B.C.), which are arguably Sophocles’ greatest works, and which both concern tragic events in the royal House of Thebes.

A word on the historical setting of Sophocles. Sophocles created his plays during the second half of the fifth century B.C., while Aeschylus, as we have seen, created his during the first half. (We are playing a little loose with dates, but you can quickly Wikipedia out the relevant details, so far as we know them.) You will have seen, from your *Ancient Greece* by Martin, that both the highest brilliance, and the gradual unraveling of Athens take place in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Whereas the first half of the century saw the rapid development of political democracy, individualism in lyric and theater (Aeschylus), and above all the astonishing victories over the huge Persian Empire, the second half of the century was dominated by intra polis conflict on the Greek mainland, the breaking down of traditional values during the Sophist intervention in Athens, and above all the long-lasting Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), with its devastating consequences for economic and social development. (I am putting a burden of history reading on you; if possible, give yourself time to read about the Sicilian Expedition, 415-413, which shows the fatal recklessness which was gripping Athenian ‘foreign policy’ at the time.) It was in this turbulent—if brilliant—second half of the great century that Sophocles created his masterpieces. And what do you know? They are masterpieces of classical *serenity*!

What to look for in reading Sophocles. Please continue to keep the chorus in mind. From the spectator’s point of view, watching from the banked stone seats of the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, the dance—turn, counterturn, standstill: intricate dance steps meshing with the highly refined prosody of the language--and the stilted, costumed appearance of the all male actors—all this would have exercised a startling operatic effect. (Mental reconstruction is essential here. The same with the classical Temple, like the Parthenon, which was brightly painted in its time, but from which the colors have all faded away, leaving the beautiful but misleading surface of gleaming marble, which we now associate with the public buildings of ancient Greece and Rome.) Above all, of course, look for the central theme or crisis, around which the drama is thrillingly disposed: the struggle, in *Antigone*, between tradition (traditional burial practice, so central to archaic culture) and the Realpolitik of state government (Creon’s province); the terrifying struggle of Oedipus to locate a polluting murderer who he himself is, and eventually, horribly, discovers.

Reading

The Complete Plays of Sophocles, translated by Robert Bagg and James Scully (New York, 2011). (We will read *Antigone* and *Oedipus The King*. If you can add *Oedipus at Colonus*, you will have read the entire Sophoclean treatment of the House of Thebes.)

Discussion

In his *Poetics* (350 B.C.) Aristotle develops a (subsequently much debated about) theory of *catharsis*, by which he means the effect proper to the experience of high classical Greek drama—and especially to the experience of Sophocles’ Theban plays. In some sense the catharsis in question must have been like a spiritual purging, arousing certain feelings, then driving them out, leaving the soul cleansed. Does this say anything to you? Do you feel ‘exalted’ by a play like *Oedipus the King*, despite its lethal conclusion?

Euripides

The new turn in tragic drama. You will note that the life and work of Euripides (485-406 B.C.) overlap the work of both Aeschylus and Sophocles. You will also notice the startling difference in Euripides. We will read three of his dramas—should we call them melodramas?—this week, and will rapidly grasp the new turn given to the tradition by this prolific dramatist, of whom fate has left us nineteen plays.

The historical setting again. Before looking into the three plays assigned for this week, we need to revert to the historical setting. All that we have said of the setting of Sophocles and Aeschylus—those second half of the century geniuses—belongs in spades to the ambient culture of Euripides. The Sophists are important. These teachers of wisdom—including public thinkers and discussers like Protagoras and Gorgias—were of great influence in the second half of the fifth century. Why were these figures needed and turned to, and what did they offer? We have seen that there is a tradition of question-asking in Milesian philosophy, and that that tradition burgeons richly into the work of Plato. The Sophists were perpetual raisers of questions, and often underminers of traditional belief. Euripides was very alert to these voices. We have noted that, in connection with the recitation of the Homeric epics there was a tradition of itinerant bards, public reciters who drew public crowds around them. By the fifth century Athens was itself ready for public discussion in every sense. There was a buzz on the streets. With the advent of a democratic polity, in the early fifth century, the energy of public outdoor life grew vibrant in Athens—especially around the central Agora or market place, the Theater of Dionysus, and the Law Courts, not to mention the sacred sites on the Acropolis. In all of these senses Athenian culture was being freed up into a passion for ideas and discussion. The Sophists, ultimately lethal foes of Socrates, were natural components of this social ferment. And into this fermenting cultural matrix Euripides emerged, writing dramas in great numbers, touching on ‘melodramatic passions,’ raising controversial issues, striking a ‘modern’ tone.

The themes of the Medea (431 B.C.), The Hippolytus (429 B.C.), and The Bacchae (405 B.C.). These three plays show us Euripides at his most powerful, daring, and showmanly.

The Medea. You will see at once that Medea—a slice, of course, from the rich archive of mythical material available to every Greek writer—is par excellence two things typically minimized in fifth century Greek culture: first, a *foreigner*, second, a *woman* who is fully invested with women’s needs and attitudes. (Would you say the same of Antigone, or of Cassandra in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*?) Brought back to Greece from the exotic East, and by a conventional and deceitful mainstreamer, Jason, Medea finds that her marriage and her children have been supplanted by a new bride, and her own exile. She takes the terrible revenge you are to read about! Et voilà! What has changed here, from Aeschylus and Sophocles? The outsider has been drawn into the Hellenic dialogue, with fierce consequences. We are growing away from the still nobility of the archaic classical posture—and Euripides is taking us there.

The Hippolytus. The intricacies of jealousy, insinuation, betrayal of innocence, melodramatic finale—all these elements of pop psychology become the raw material of this ‘modern’ drama, which bathes in the questioning, discussion-rich atmosphere of a literary culture which is conspicuously public. As in the *Medea*, Euripides penetrates, here, into the feelings which undergird those *ritual/mythical* behaviors which were the stock of epic, and of the two tragedians we have studied before Euripides. The fixed world of myth has been opened out to reveal the boiling humanity myth was initially created to temper.

The Bacchae. The Athens of the end of century was concerned not only with the new importance of women and foreigners, the foreign in general, but with psychologically ‘modern’ modes of feeling, emotional experimentation and quest, and passion breaking out from the mythical mold—where it is confined in the cases of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, or Antigone—square into the midst of Greek society. Pentheus, of course, is the perfect middle class bureaucrat foil against which to read the unlicensed and uncontrollable fury of the Bacchantes, exaggerated representatives of a strain of the demonic, which lurks throughout Greek culture, even when what we most expect is form and reason.

Reading

Ten Plays by Euripides, translated by Paul Roche (New York, 1998). (Our assignment will be to read the three plays discussed in this week's syllabus.)

Discussion

We are struck, from the start, by Euripides' attention to women and their psychology. We have seen powerful and fascinating women in Aeschylus and Sophocles—Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Antigone—but these characters are driven and one-dimensional, whereas Euripides' women (Medea, Andromache, Phaedra) are women in an historical situation, trying to cope, as we might say. This seems a clear case of Euripides wanting to bring everyday reality onto the stage? Am I right here? Or not?

Aristophanes

The dramatic imagination: comedy. We are at a turning point in our review of Greek drama. We have spent three weeks on tragedy, and now are turning to a week on Aristophanes (455-385 B.C.), the premier Greek comedian. Are we still dealing with the same dramatic imagination we introduced with Aeschylus?

Yes and no. We are still dealing with public performances, held at major religious festivals in Athens, in the Theater of Dionysus. The same intense competition for prizes, the same lively and personally involved audience. But from the first glance we note a change in the kinds of theme presented. With Aristophanes we find no mythical titles, no actions based on 'slices from Homer's feast,' and total involvement with contemporary issues—the folly of war, the vagaries of the legal system in Athens, the mundane dimensions of rivalries between competing dramatic poets, the practice of 'selling wisdom' in public (the practice imputed to the Sophists.) We have seen dramatists concerned with 'actual events'—*The Persians* of Aeschylus, for example—or with contemporarily relevant events—the practice of Euripides—but with Aristophanes and Greek comedy we see the veil of the mythical totally stripped away. You may want to pursue the historical background of this genre difference, which will take you into theories of the kinds of dance festival tragedy and comedy split off from, in Archaic Greece. (That byway of historical investigation will bring you to the door of the satyr play, the 'extra play' the tragedian would insert into his trilogy as an entertainment, and in fact a conduit back into another kind of bumptious and erotic rural archaic past.) The secret to the peculiar *reality-driven* character of Greek comedy may lie hidden in the archaic roots of the genre.

Is the comic drama 'conservative'? Yes. Another trait of Greek comedy is implicit in the historical suggestions of the previous paragraph. Comedy, while dealing with the foibles of the real present, works from a position of assured value, generally the rightness of the old ways, and sees the present as falling away 'comically' from the standard occupied by the comedian: who believes in old fashioned wisdom, the traditional dispensation of justice, the dignity of the creative artist as derived from the Homeric model. Greek comedy, like comedy in general, looks down from a confident view point. How else can you mock?

The Clouds (423 B.C.) takes aim at precisely the 'public selling of wisdom, or argumentative skill,' of which the Sophists were accused. In fact Socrates, who was in no way guilty of such 'public selling,' is the butt of the joke in this drama about an ambitious farmer, whose son has racked up a huge debt, and whose dad is facing an angry law court. The son is sent to Socrates' 'Thinkery,' a thought-house where one learns not only to forget about the traditional values of the Athenians, but how to trick the law courts, and pull the wool over juries' eyes. The ensuing turmoil is hilarious, but not innocuous, for in fact the bias against Socrates, which we see the results of in Plato's *Apology*, is being established right here in this play, written a quarter century before Socrates' death. There could be no more compelling argument, that comedy bites hard into the social fabric—in contrast to tragedy, which generates discoveries in mythical outreach.

Lysistrata (411 B.C.). The downward spiral of Athenian political life, toward the end of the exhausting Peloponnesian War, the growing influence of women in social life, and the delights of bawdy sex: all these conditions converge to support this hilarious/biting comedy. Basically, the women of Athens are fed up with war, and with male ineptitude, and in a series of moves take over the Acropolis, the sacred center of Athens, and read the riot act to their husbands. No sex until the war ends. The way this torture plays out is as phallic and uproarious as Athenian public amusement could be, joining serious points to outrageous fantasies.

The Frogs (405 B.C.). Dionysus, the god of the theater for the Athenians, is disgusted at the low quality of dramatic presentations in Athens, Sophocles and Euripides having died the previous year. He decides to descend into Hades and to bring back Euripides, his favorite poet. However when Dionysus arrives in the underworld he finds himself in the midst of hubbub and a literary duel between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. In the end Dionysus returns from Hades with Aeschylus, but what brings down the house is not that outcome, but the subtle/raucous debate, between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. It is this debate that I stress, *the subtleties of literary points aired to a delighted citizen audience!*

Reading

Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Clouds, The Birds, Lysistrata, The Frogs; translated by Arrowsmith, Lattimore, Parker (New York, 19943). (Why not read all four plays?)

Discussion

Are you too amazed that Aristophanes (in *The Frogs*) can display, in the highest spirits and to the evident delight of his audience, debates on subtle literary points, illustrations of this or that great tragedian's stylistic skills or foibles? Does this not imply a literate audience, and one for which the experience of the theater is a central entertainment? Have we any similar collective experience in modern cultures? What about televised national sports events? As for the theater itself, has it lost its central power, in the Industrialized West?