2 BACKGROUND

2.1 CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY: THE CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION

Greek tragedy developed as a form of lasting artistic expression at Athens in the fifth century. We speak of Greek tragedy, but we should more justly speak of Attic or Athenian tragedy, for it is from Athens that all our surviving examples come. The first effective development took place in the sixth century under the patronage of the enlightened dictator Pisistratus. We think of dictatorship ('tyranny': see *Agamemnon* ll. 1355, 1365; Aeschylus's use is anachronistic, since there was no tyranny in the Mycenean age) as fundamentally opposed to democracy, but the dictators arose to challenge a narrowly-based oligarchy, and in making their challenge they looked for broader support. At the same time they were autocrats, and the problem of the succession and the corruptions of power meant that the institution was not long-lasting, although its achievements were. Pisistratus turned Athens into a major cultural centre, and it was during his period of power that something recognizable as a play began to be performed at the festivals of Dionysus, with a competition between different actor-dramatists. Some of these plays were riotous and bawdy ('comedies'), some dealt with more solemn themes from myth, legend and tradition ('tragedies'). One Thespis, whose name has become proverbial, was the first to separate himself from the singing and dancing chorus and become an actor who conversed with them: the Greek word for actor, *hypocrites* (the source of our 'hypocrite') means 'answerer'. In 534 or thereabouts, he won a prize for his performance.

Tragedy means 'goat-song' but why is not clear. It has been suggested that a goat was the prize in early contests, or that a goat was sacrificed at the festival. Either may be right. In twentieth-century England the goat has a vaguely comic flavour but in ancient Greece, it played a significant part in the economy as scavenger and as provider of milk, and, when sacrificed, of meat as a special treat on these rare occasions. The goat was sacred to Dionysus and was the normal object of sacrifice to him.

All our surviving tragedies, apart from the anonymous *Rhesus*, lie between the years 479, when Greece threw back the invading armies from Persia and began the process of liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor, and 404 when after twenty-seven years of war Athens's imperial ambitions finally collapsed before the coalition of her enemies. It was a period when Greek independence was assured; when the development of sea-power placed Athens on the crest of a wave of economic expansion. It brought her sailors and traders into contact with many parts of the world, and brought visitors from these parts to her own lively community. Athens was a self-governing city-state (*polis*), unusually large, unusually prosperous and unusually democratic.

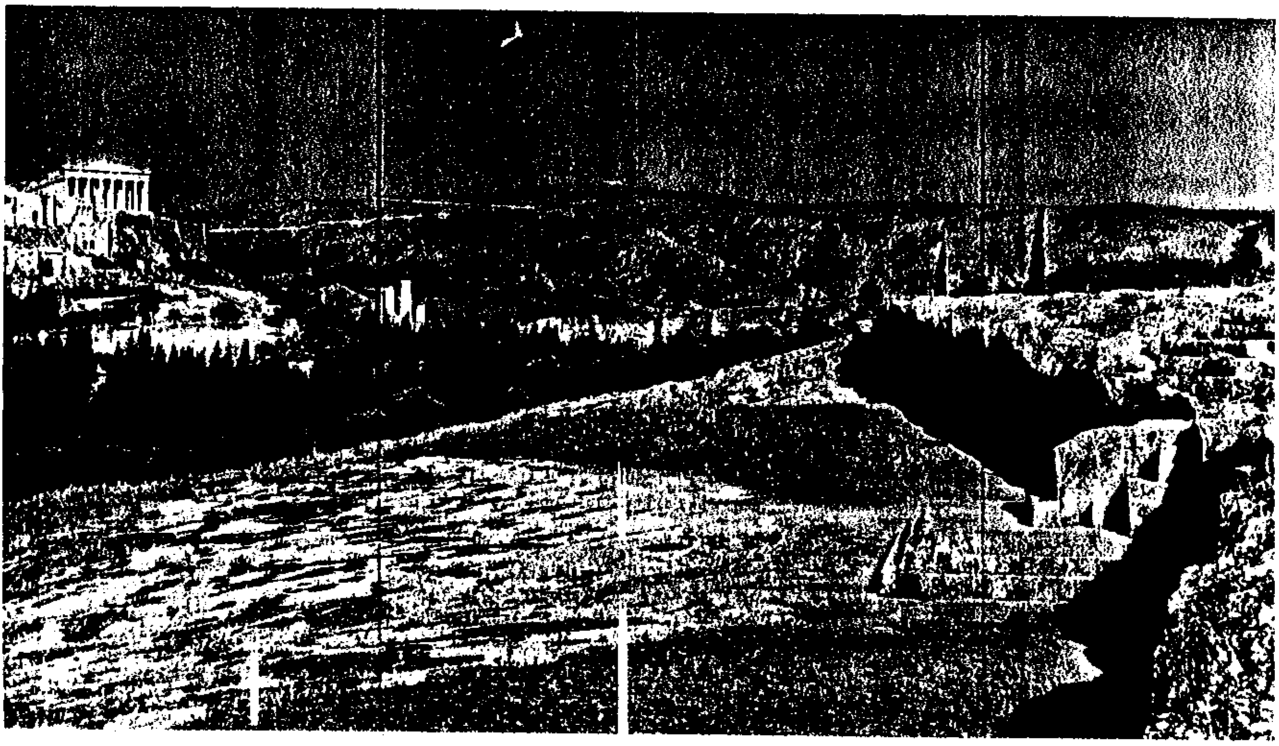


Figure 1 Pnyx showing the Bema (Speaker's Platform). The original platform was at the other end of the Pnyx. When it was moved its site was piled up with earth to make a kind of theatre. (Photo: Alison Frantz.)

It is vital to understand that the audience at the theatre was essentially those who composed the democratic Assembly and the people's courts, though there is evidence that women were allowed to attend the plays (see note on *Eumenides* l. 143). Admission was originally free but at some point in the fifth century a nominal charge was imposed and seats allocated (the tickets were perhaps lead discs), but a special fund met the cost for the needy. The theatre was much the same pattern as the Pnyx where the Assembly met, and the word for the speaker's platform there (*bema*) was also applied to the dramatic stage. We must therefore picture an audience extremely aware politically, accustomed to listening to skilled oratory, fascinated by the debate over different forms of constitution, over war and peace, and over the 'open' and the 'closed' society. There is a properly rhetorical element in Athenian tragedy, and the political dimension is inescapable. In comedy too we are told that there was a popular demand for a repetition of Aristophanes's *The Frogs* because of its political wisdom. We may find this strange and so must be constantly on the watch for it. It must be remembered too that we are dealing with a different age and clime from our own. It was largely an oral culture in which it was a reasonable accomplishment to have *The Iliad* (15,693 lines) by heart; a culture which relied on memory not reference books. The audience was not a staid northern one, but a volatile southern one; an audience which nearly lynched Aeschylus because they thought he had disclosed religious mysteries in his play; an audience which held up proceedings with a riot when an actor spoke the seemingly immoral sentiment 'What's shameful when the doer finds no shame?'; an audience which dissolved into unrestrained laughter when an actor made 'easily' sound like 'weaselly'.

Not only is the political dimension inescapable, so is the religious. The tragedies were performed at a religious festival, held in March in honour of the god Dionysus, a god of wild nature, of fertility and the phallus, a god of madness, intoxication, religious ecstasy and inspiration. It was clearly a spring festival celebrating the coming of new life after the death of winter, and it is possible, as some have thought, that there may at one time have been a ritual drama expressing this. But we must not try to force all dramatic myths into that strait-jacket. It is in fact hard for us to enter into the mood and spirit of an ancient religious festival, for we must not divorce religion from life. Religion is not something which 'happens on Sunday'; religion is in some sense life. The great festivals simply express at keypoints in the year something that is happening all along. When there was a nymph in every stream and a dryad in every bush, when your very fireplace was a goddess, when Poseidon ruled the waves and Demeter the crops, when every casual find was a gift from Hermes and every clap of thunder the voice of Zeus himself, then religion was always there. We must not secularize Greek religion, and this means also that we must put the Puritan tradition behind us — or rather that we must go back beyond it. What we might consider obscenity or irreverent laughter will have their places in religious observance and practice. A Greek religious festival is not a Methodist Sunday School.

Figure 2 Dionysus. Relief from the theatre at Perge. (Sonia Halliday.)

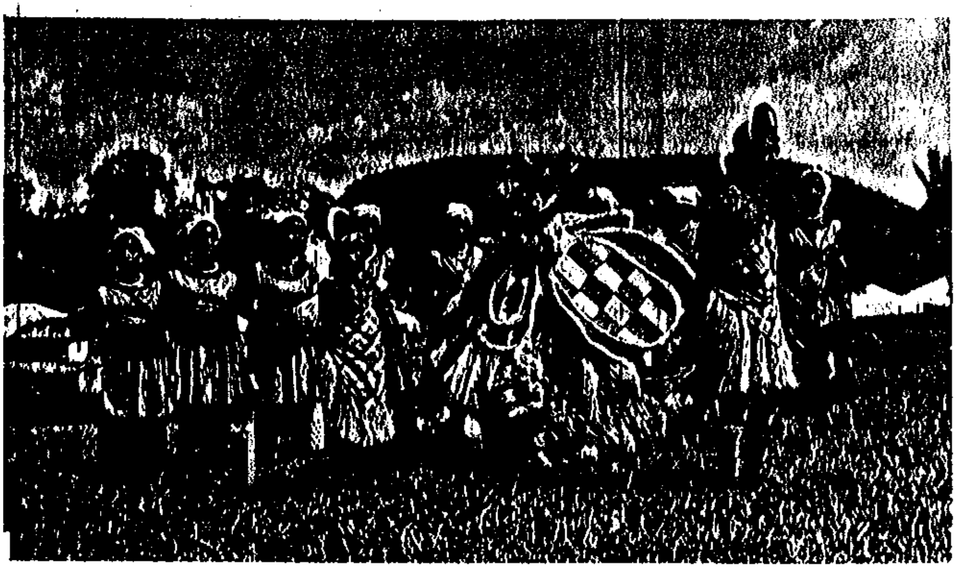


Figure 3 West African masquerade. Humol Devil (Photograph by P.S. Mould. Reproduced by courtesy of Sierra Leone Bookshops Ltd.)

The origins of tragedy are complex and controversial. From an early period we know of choruses, some in animal costumes, who sang and danced in honour of different gods. The hymn in honour of Dionysus was called a dithyramb. Certainly drama starts from some such choral lyrics but it is hard to see a direct line from dithyramb to tragedy. There is however one unique feature about the plays: the actors wore masks and elaborate costumes. Some kind of masked dance-drama is found in West Africa today associated with ancestral festivals: the masked costume represents the power of the ancestors, and the human may not appear through it. Further, it is almost unthinkable to have an ancestral festival without the ancestors appearing in the form of a masquerade. At Athens shortly before the Great Dionysia there was an ancestral festival, also associated with Dionysus, called the Anthesteria, at which the dead were believed to come to life again. There is no record of a masquerade at the Anthesteria. There can hardly be such a festival without a masquerade; yet there is no trace of such a masquerade. Why not? *Because it had been transferred to the later festival of Dionysus.* This is not pure speculation, for there is a parallel at nearby Sicyon where the dictator Cleisthenes ordered 'tragic dances' formerly held in honour of the hero Adrastus to be transferred to the service of Dionysus. This transference gives us the link between the songs in honour of Dionysus and a wide variety of ancestral myths. The mask is the key to the fact that ancestral festivals come together with Dionysiac festivals to create tragedy.

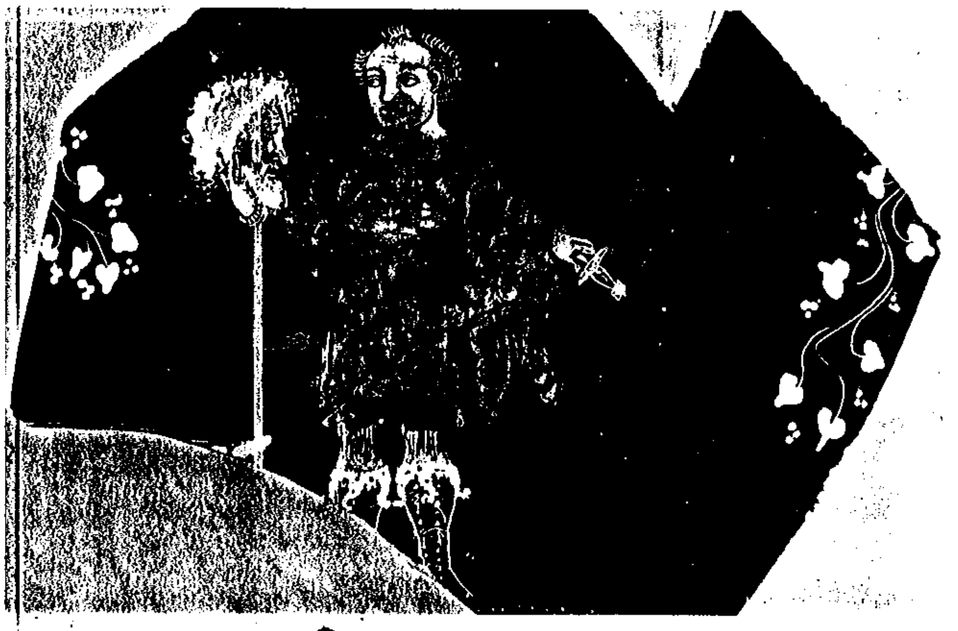


Figure 4 Actor with mask. Detail from a vase (Antikenabteilung, Martin v. Wagner Museum, Universität Würzburg.)

Revision Exercise A

(a) What did the period of dictatorship contribute to the drama of Athens?

(b) In honour of what god were tragedies performed?

(c) What is a dithyramb?

(d) Who composed the audience for the tragedies?

(e) What, can we reasonably suppose from analogy, was the original significance of the masks?

(Answers on p.69)

As the dialogue between actor and chorus combined with choral song and ballet, developed into fully fledged drama, the custom grew that at each festival three dramatists were chosen to compete on successive days. Each presented a *tetralogy*, that is a sequence of four plays. The first three formed a *trilogy* of tragedies, essentially serious plays, though not necessarily with an unhappy ending. In early days the chorus, who might be city-elders, suppliant women or captive nobles, were central to the action; later, they tended to become distanced from the action, and, sometimes by the fourth century, simply produced a musical interlude, like the orchestra in the modern theatre. In Aeschylus (525–456), the first of the three great Attic tragedians, the three plays of the trilogy are linked together as episodes in a single chain of events. But Sophocles (496–406) preferred to work with single plays, and Euripides (480–406) followed him in this. But though their trilogies were not episodes in a single story, it is hard not to think that there was some connecting thread, and I have suggested elsewhere that in 414 Euripides presented three plays on divine parentage: *Ion, Heracles* and *Alope*. The fourth play was a satyr-play: a bawdy, rollicking, phallic romp, bringing relief at the end of the day. Here the mood of the spring fertility-festival comes to the fore. The relationship of the satyr-play to the preceding trilogy is not certain. Aeschylus, using a single myth, liked to present some part of that myth in a different spirit; he ended his Oedipus-trilogy with a satyr-play called *The Sphinx*. The satyr-play attached to *The Oresteia* is said to have been *Proteus*. It is lost, but perhaps dealt with Menelaus's return. It looks as if the other dramatists used the satyr-play to parody some key-theme or key-episode in their trilogy.

The theatre-building at the end of the fifth century is usually called the Periclean Theatre, after the great democratic leader of the mid-fifth century, Pericles. Its exact date is uncertain; it cannot have been before 443 or later than about 425. It thus may have seen the majority of the surviving plays of Sophocles and Euripides, but none of those of Aeschylus. The theatre of Aeschylus was a less elaborate construction on the same site. Before that plays had been performed in the city centre or *agora*. The spectators sat on wooden platforms erected for the occasion, and it was the collapse of these during a performance which led to the construction of a permanent theatre in the early fifth century (as we know from the pottery found in the earth-fill used for the theatre). Aeschylus used most of the devices known in the Periclean theatre, but the stage building, which also served as green room (i.e. the actors' accommodation) was fairly simple and made of wood.

The Periclean theatre was very large, seating some 14,000 spectators. They sat on benches of wood or stone in tiers in a vast semi-circle rising up the hillside of the Acropolis. The priest of Dionysus and a few other privileged individuals had ringside seats. None was closer than sixty feet to the actors, which is the distance to the back of the dress circle in a large modern theatre, and the spectators at the back were a full 300 feet away. Acoustics were, however, perfect and remain so even in the absence of a stage-building to trap and reflect the sound. Even so delivery will have been more rhetorical than we are used to in the modern theatre. Delicate acting was out of the question, and much of the performance would have seemed to us 'ham' if we saw it close to. Changes of facial expression would have been quite indiscernible even had actors not worn masks. Gesture must have been broad and sweeping; subtlety was out of the question. There was no question of intimate theatre. Theme and performance were on the grand scale.

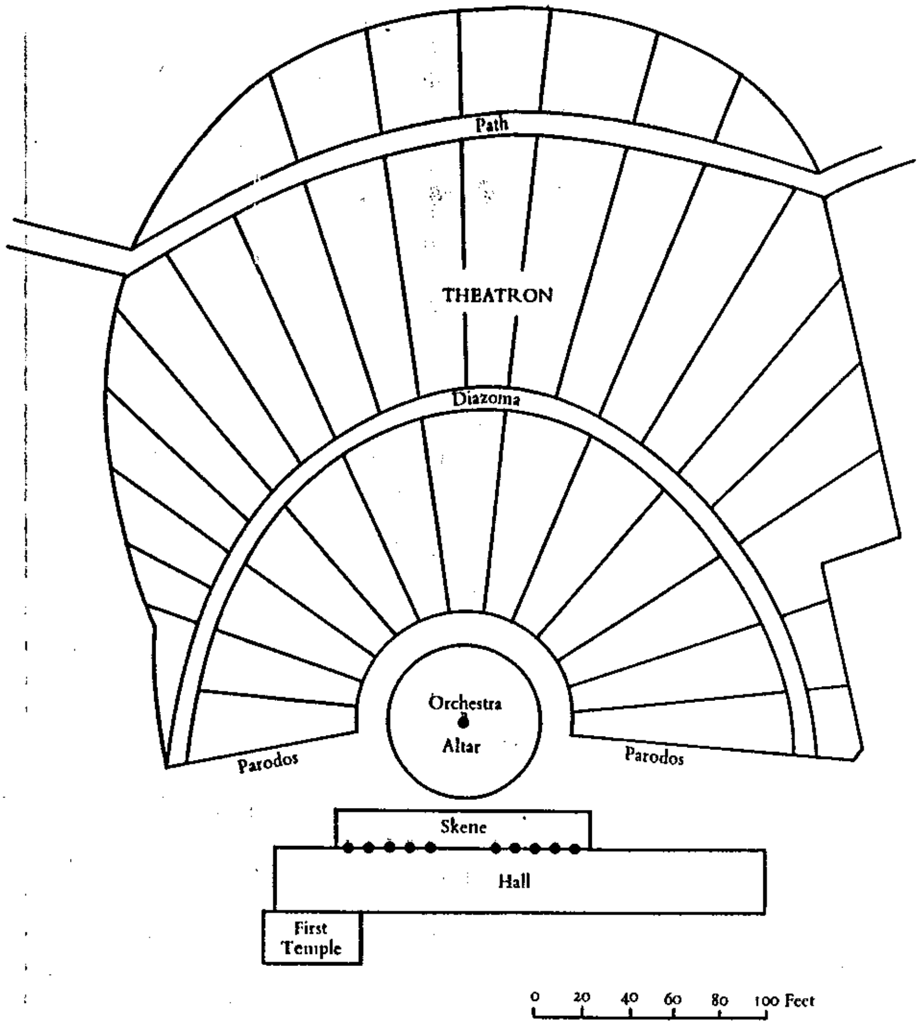


Figure 5 Plan of Periclean Theatre. ('I.C. Baldry (1971) The Greek Tragic Theatre, *Chatto and Windus.)*

Between the audience and the stage-building was the orchestra or dancing-floor: a circle some sixty feet in diameter with an altar in the middle. This was the arena of the chorus, and it is important to recognize that the element of opera and ballet was an integral part of Greek drama, and that the majority of the spectators would be looking down on the patterns woven by the dancers. This is one reason for the unfulfilled feeling after so many performances of Greek tragedy in the proscenium arch theatre; we never see the chorus as we should, and a central ingredient is therefore lacking.

Solid stone foundations suggest a stage-building as much as 105 feet long. This would extend far beyond the view of the audience on either side, and it is likely that the sides were turned into wings framing the stage. This would leave room for a stage forty-five feet wide, about the width of that in the largest modern theatres; the depth would be ten feet. But recent archaeological evidence seems to show these limestone foundations date from the fourth century, and that the Periclean stage-building was more like sixty feet long. Perhaps the width of the stage area was a little less. It is fairly certain that there was a low stage, perhaps one and a half feet high. A high stage would have separated actors from chorus intolerably. But some kind of stage seems essential. In the early days of drama the actor was elevated on a cart or table; conservatism will have maintained this. Without some elevation the actors would have been masked by the chorus for some of those in the front row. One or two plays demand a stage: in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Agamemnon enters in a chariot; Clytemnestra comes to greet him from the palace and has the servants unroll a red carpet or tapestry for him to make his disastrous and triumphal entry. It seems psychologically necessary for her to appear on a higher level; certainly she must not be masked by the chariot; and the tapestry will have been far more impressive spreading down the steps. There is in fact a vase-painting, datable to about 410, showing a scene from a comedy on a low stage with few steps. It is likely that this stage was a permanent fixture for tragedy as well as comedy.

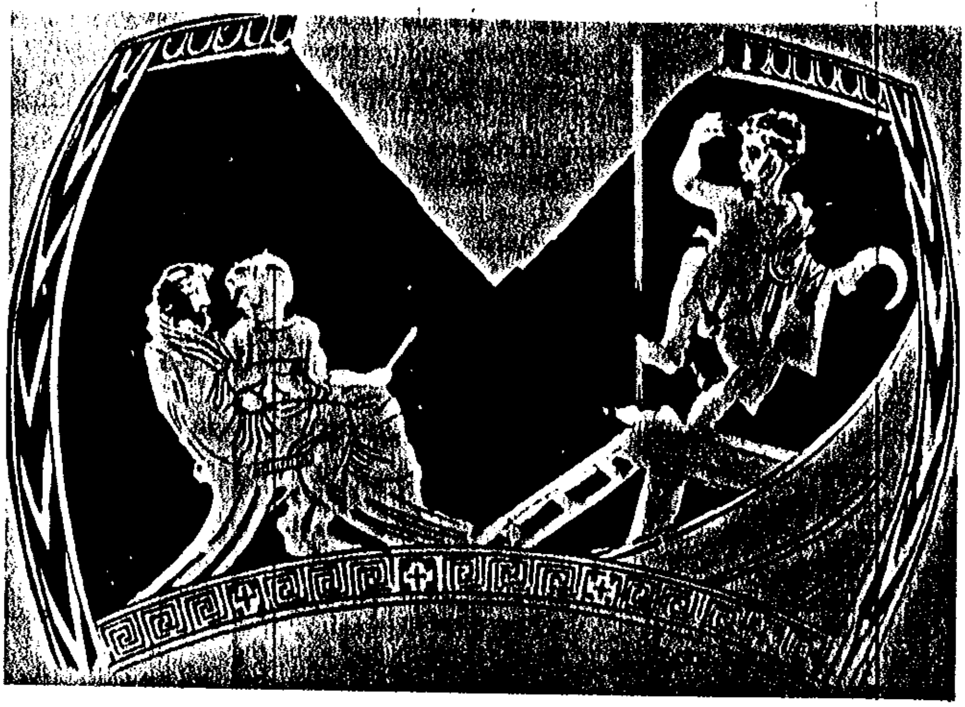


Figure 6 Stage in a comedy, c. 410. Detail from an oinochoe. (Private Collection, Greece.)

The exact extent of the movements of actors and choruses is uncertain. I have seen a modern production of a classical play in the ancient Greek theatre at Epidaurus where the chorus sang seated on the stage and the actors acted in the vast emptiness of the orchestra. This is certainly wrong. In all Greek plays a great deal of the action takes place close to the stage-building; the chorus certainly danced in the orchestra. But we must not divorce the chorus from the action, and we shall see reason to suppose that in *The Eumenides* Orestes goes for sanctuary to the middle of the orchestra. The chorus-leader shares in dialogue, and when the actors were on stage the chorus must have been grouped in a tableau close to the stage, attentive to the action, and responding visually to it by movement and gesture.

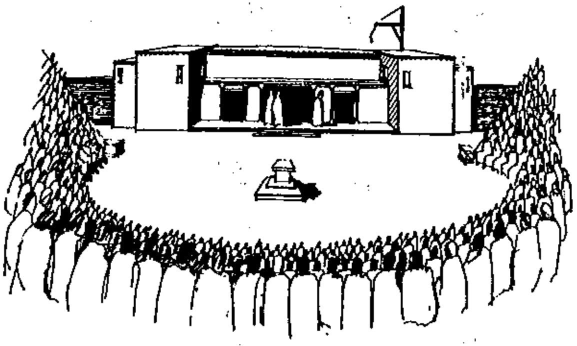


Figure 7 Possible reconstruction of the Theatre of Dionysus. (J. Ferguson (1972) A Companion to Greek Tragedy, *University of Texas.)*

The stage-building would represent a palace or temple. In the Periclean theatre, as in the Aeschylean, it was made of wood. It cannot have been repainted between plays, so there must have been a standard backdrop. Some plays require a cave (e.g. in *Philoctetes*) or tent (e.g. in *Hecabe*); probably for these the entrance was draped with skins. The entrance involved double doors which (it is reasonable to guess) were about twelve feet wide in all. There were probably also two smaller doors, one on each side of them, though it has been argued that the Periclean stage-building was not wide enough to permit this. There is no surviving tragedy which requires their use, but Aristophanes's comedies certainly do, so they must have been available. The stage-building (which also contained the actors' changing-rooms, the property-store and the like) was quite shallow, perhaps not more than twelve feet deep. At the first-floor level there was a projecting platform; this was a feature of the old theatre too, and was used by the Watchman on the palace-roof in *Agamemnon*, and to tremendous melodramatic effect at the end of Euripides's *Orestes*. To my mind this cannot have been the *theologeion*: the platform where the gods appeared; no mortals could stand there. There must therefore have been a second storey, marking off the area of immortals from the area of mortals. This helps us to understand the problems of the painted backcloth (*skene*). The records tell us that Sophocles introduced scene-painting; its greatest practitioner was Agatharchus, who also did the scenery for a revival of Aeschylus in the new theatre, and who was an expert in perspective. In Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* the backcloth showed a distant view of Athens. The only place for such a backcloth was above the stage building in front of the platform which carried the *theologeion*; it would give a natural view beyond the stage-building for the vast majority of the spectators who were looking down not up at it; and it would enable the gods to appear in their natural habitat, the sky. The word 'backcloth' is a misnomer; it would consist of a set of painted wooden panels, easily shifted between plays. This apart, there may have been simple scenery on the stage or even in the orchestra; I have argued elsewhere that in *The Eumenides* Aeschylus demands a reproduction of the sensational Athene Promachos, a statue of the goddess, in the centre of the dancing-floor. But there was no great elaboration, and when in Euripides's *Ion* the chorus elaborately describes all the sights of Delphi as conscientiously as any Baedeker we can be certain that this is a verbal account of all that the spectators have to imagine, not of the scene they are looking at. It is important to realize that there was not much time for scene-changing between plays: it has been calculated that the intervals cannot have amounted to more than two hours in all; that is to say, there would be not much more than half an hour between one play and the next.

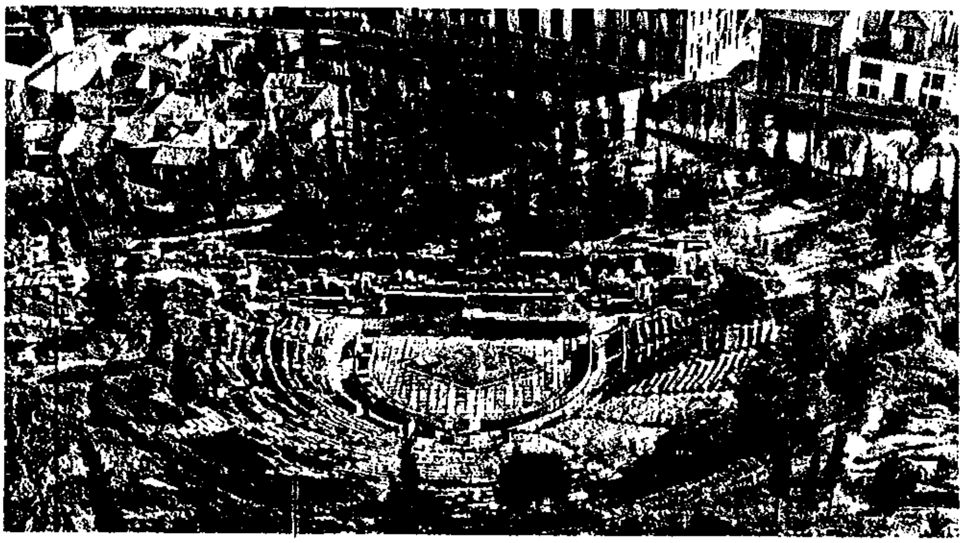


Figure 8 Theatre of Dionysus at Athens; the present form is Roman. (Alison Frantz.)

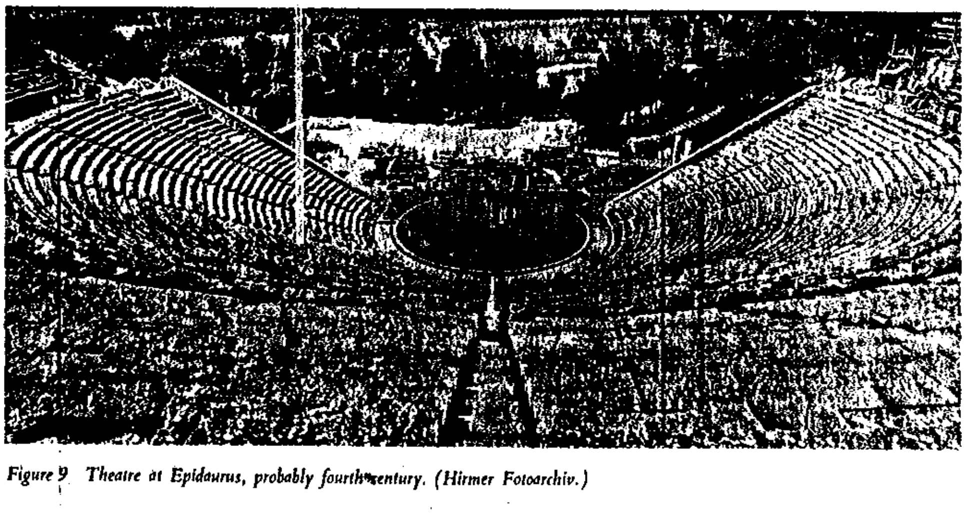


Figure 9 Theatre at Epidaurus, probably fourth century. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

Revision Exercise B

(a) What was a satyr-play and what was its relation to tragedy?

(b) Approximately how many spectators would the Periclean theatre of Dionysus at Athens hold?

(c) What was the orchestra?

(d) Is there any evidence for a stage?

(e) What was the *theologeion*?

(Answers on p.69)

The theatre was of course in the open air. There was no artificial lighting. If a scene were set in darkness this had to be imagined. There is such a scene in the anonymous *Rhesus*; it is possibly designed as a tour-de-force for the actors to mime the behaviour of a man in darkness. It was possible to give an indication of night by the use of torches. But the first play of the day would begin before the sun was fully up, and some dramatists make use of this fact, Aeschylus in *Agamemnon*, Sophocles in *Antigone*, Euripides in *Electra* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis* for example. One curious feature of the theatre at Athens is that it is designed so that the sun shines into the spectators' eyes. This means that it would be quite impossible for them to discern anything in the dark interior of the stage-building, even with the doors open. Tableaux from the interior must have been brought out onto the stage.

The device for doing this was called the *ekkuklema*; it was a platform on wheels, which may have been ten feet wide and eight or nine feet deep. The argument that this is an invention of the Hellenistic age (perhaps the third century) is not persuasive; it is a necessity for some of the tableaux of the classical theatre, Clytemnestra with the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Heracles with the dead bodies of his wife and children for example, and there is evidence from comedy of characters being 'rolled out'.

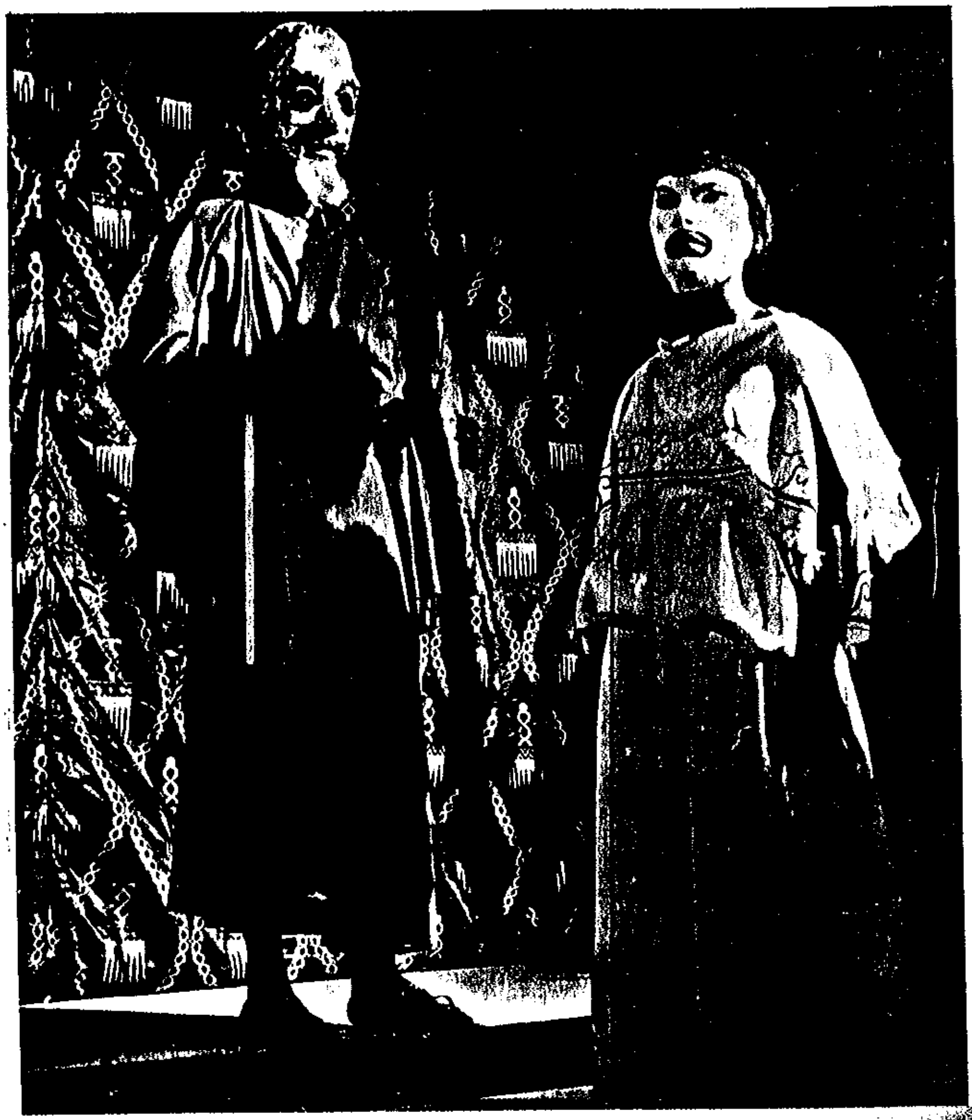
The other main stage-mechanism was the *mechane* or crane. The *deus ex machina* is so familiar to us that it is important to remember that most divine epiphanies took place on the *theologeion* not on the crane, and that the crane was by no means used exclusively for gods; for example, Medea made her exit and Bellerophon his entrance by this means. The crane had a jib which could be raised and lowered by a system of ropes and pulleys; a stout rope or system of ropes carried the weight of the car on a hook. Probably the car could be decorated in different ways, to be the chariot of the sun for Medea, or the winged horse Pegasus for Bellerophon. The system was strong and could certainly carry more than one actor; it was certainly used by Eos for removing the body of Memnon, and possibly for Sleep and Death carrying off Sarpedon. I myself believe, though perhaps not many would agree, that it was sensationally and exceptionally used to bring in some members of the chorus in Aeschylus's *Prometheus* and that this was parodied by a similar entry in Aristophanes's *The Clouds*.

Apart from these, effects would be simple. Smoke could be produced to suggest the burning of a building, at the end of *The Women of Troy*, for example. Noises off might represent thunder or the collapse of buildings. At a climax of *The Bacchants* the chorus describe the palace collapsing before their eyes, there is thunder, and the flame leaps high on Semele's tomb. Exactly what happens remains mysterious: I have seen a brilliant modern production in which the rapid rotation of a mask before a spotlight has given exactly this shuddering effect, yet the building remained standing and the producer retained the ambiguity. This resource was not available to the Athenian theatre, and it is quite certain that nothing happened to the building. But there was no difficulty over a thunderous noise or for a hidden stage hand to encourage a leaping flame. Acrobatic actors could produce dramatic effects. Ajax throwing himself on his sword was a famous part for an athletic actor. In *Orestes* the frightened slave jumps or falls from the first storey to the ground. In Euripides's *The Suppliant Women* there was an even more startling scene when Evadne leaped from the first storey into a pyre, seemingly, though not certainly, on stage; it must have been designed with a hollow centre and a pile of cushions to land on.

Greek plays had no stage directions and entrances and exits are clearly marked by words spoken. In *Agamemnon* the chorus addresses Clytemnestra at line 83: she does not reply, and they do not address her again till line 258. Many editors assume that she leaves the stage and re-enters. If Aeschylus had intended this he would have indicated it. Her presence during the long choral song is dramatically essential. Entrances and exits were fairly simple. The main door of the stage building was used for this purpose, and passages between the stage-building and the audience conventionally represented entries from the town (stage-left) and country (stage-right). The chorus usually entered from the town, but in *The Eumenides* they made a startling initial appearance from the stage-building, and later reappeared from the country. In addition to these three, and appearances on the roof (for humans) or on the *theologeion* (for divinities), or hoisted up from behind the stage-building on the crane, one or two plays seem to have involved an entrance from a trapdoor in the stage or a special box fitted to the front of the stage which would give the same effect: such is the appearance of the dead Darius in *The Men of Persia* or Death in *Alcestis*. The audience seems to have accepted a convention by which actors might take up their position before the play began in situations where in the proscenium-arch theatre they would be 'discovered' when 'the curtain rose'; there was of course no curtain. This convention is absolutely necessary in Euripides's *Heracles in his Madness* and perhaps also in *The Women of Troy*.

Greek dramatists by no means observed with any stringency the celebrated three unities of time, place and action (contrary to some ill-informed opinion, this is not a doctrine of Aristotle). There was a general tendency to limit the extent of an action to a single day, but within that the singing of a chorus might cover several hours of dramatic time; there is an excellent example from *The Bacchants* in the quite short chorus which separates the departure of Dionysus and Pentheus for Cithaeron and the return of the Messenger with the news of Pentheus's death. The chorus represents in some sense a suspension of the normal time-scale. In *Agamemnon* we certainly have to allow for an interval of days if not weeks between the beacon bearing the news of Troy's fall and the arrival of Agamemnon.

Figure 10 Sophocles's Antigone. *Nigerian production (from a photograph in the collection of Professor John Ferguson)*



Similarly, there is usually a consistent scene within a single play, but there are some remarkable exceptions. *The Men of Persia* involves not so much a change of scene as a foreshortened view. Certainly Darius's tomb was not in the council-chamber. But the scene is perhaps Susa, and the details do not greatly matter. But *The Eumenides* involves a leap from Delphi to Athens. I have argued that the change was marked by a removal of the centre of attention from the stage to the centre of the orchestra, where the statue of Athene must have stood for the chorus to dance their binding spell around Orestes. Another major change is in Sophocles's *Ajax* the scene shifts from the camp to a lonely part of the seashore. Here stage-hands may have made some simple changes of scenery, perhaps bringing on some stylized rocks. Unity of action is more general. Greek tragedy has no sub-plots, though Euripides was interested in weaving two seemingly distinct episodes (as in *Heracles in his Madness*) into a single unity.

Greek actors wore masks which could be painted to give the broad outline of the character concerned. Less is lost by the absence of facial expression than might be thought; we can accept most conventions once we are used to them. One of my more fascinating evenings in the theatre was an occasion in Nigeria when the students' dramatic society did a double bill of Sophocles's *Antigone* in masks and Anouilh's *Antigone* without masks. Plainly the use of masks gives a kind of hieratic, expressionistic twist to the performance, and also much more devolves on voice and gesture. (There is a similar use of masks in Chinese drama.) Occasionally a single part demands more than one mask; Oedipus, for instance, or Polymestor in Euripides's *Hecabe*, must have changed masks after their blinding. Incidentally the old view that the mask acted as a kind of megaphone is without foundation.

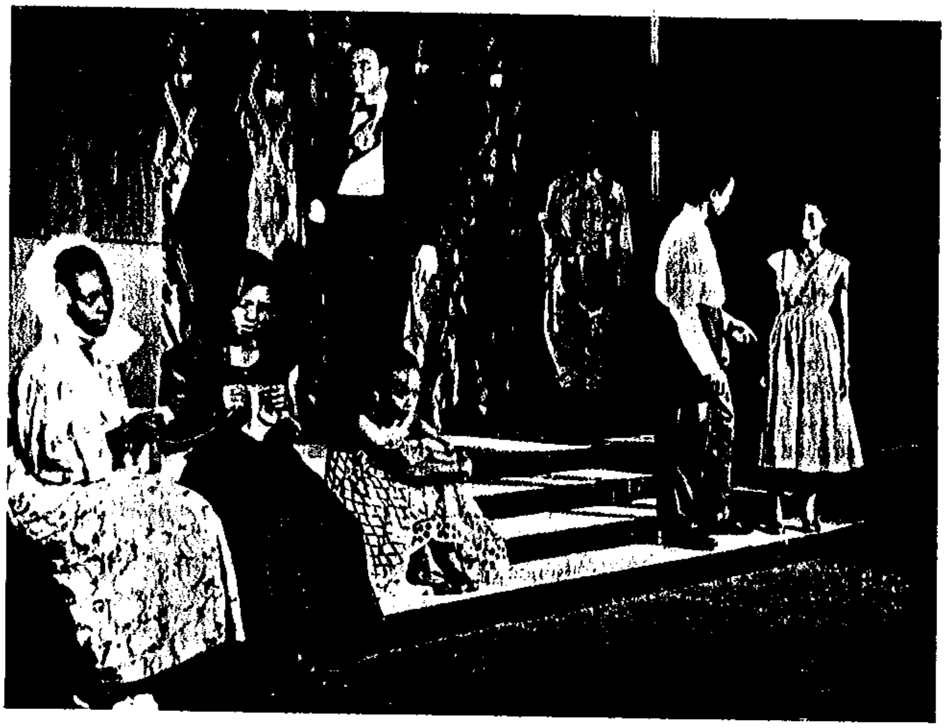


Figure 11 Anouilh's Antigone. *Nigerian production (from a photograph in the collection of Professor John Ferguson)*

Costumes were rich and flowing; it is said that they copied priestly vestments. Once again we are aware of a hieratical element. Aeschylus in particular went in for spectacular costumes. Euripides by contrast caused a sensation by the anti-cultural device of bringing on characters in rags. Sophocles, who was never averse to learning from younger men, does the same in some of his later plays. All actors wore on their feet a pair of buskins, loose boots which fitted either foot, and provided a nickname for cross-bench politicians such as Theramenes (see Unit 9). The device of building up the stature through heavy soles, as in women's footwear of the 1970s, does not belong to the classical period. A few simple props helped identification. Zeus had his thunderbolt, Apollo his bow or lyre, Poseidon his trident. On the human scale the king carried a sceptre of office, the herald wore a wreath and the traveller a broad-brimmed hat.

Thespis introduced the first actor; Aeschylus liberated drama from its shackles by introducing a second, and Sophocles a third, an innovation which Aeschylus used in *The Oresteia*. Most classical tragedies employ three actors for speaking parts. They were all men, and the masks and costumes enabled them to play women's rôles. As plays had more than three characters, actors were expected to double parts, and again the masks and costumes made this practicable. Sophocles's last play *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously, either requires four actors or involves an exceedingly complex interchange of rôles. A fourth actor was however permitted in walk-on, non-speaking parts, and indeed some plays require several such attendants. In fact, although three characters may be on the stage simultaneously, it is rare to have a *scène à trois* where all three are fully engaged; more frequently they confront one another in pairs, while the third remains for a period silent. This technique merits careful examination. The chief actor is called the protagonist, his associates the deuteragonist and tritagonist. It is a solecism to speak, even in metaphor, of 'the two protagonists in the drama'.

In reading Greek tragedy we must accept certain conventions about the way characters speak. In the first place, we should remember that we ought not to be reading it at all. All ancient literature should be heard, and is written to be heard, and the Athenians being a politically alert people, we must expect a certain amount of rhetoric. Secondly, Greek drama, tragic or comic, is poetic drama; that is, the language is heightened: it is not conversational, everyday speech. Also it is rhythmic: the spoken parts are written in the iambic metre, varying between 6/8 time (♪♩ ♪♩) and 7/8 time (♩ ♩ ♪ ♩); this approximated to normal speech rhythms, though with a greater regularity. (It is not easy to express this without musical notation, since the pattern is matter of syllable-length, not of stress. The first, short-long-short-long, is roughly 'a pair of eyes'; the second, long-long-short-long, is roughly 'forward in arms'. Thirdly, the Greek dramatists devised a form of quickfire, snappy dialogue called *stichomythia*; this is an exchange between characters in which they speak alternate lines. Shakespeare uses the device in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Richard III*. For example:

> K. RICH: Wrong not her birth; she is of royal blood.
> Q. ELIZ: To save her life I'll say she is not so.
> K. RICH: Her life is safest only in her birth.
> Q. ELIZ: And only in that safety died her brothers.

In *stichomythia* it is always worth looking for breaks in the pattern. An insertion of a two-line speech is likely to underline some dramatic point. Half-lines represent a quickening of the pace and a heightening of intensity. Fourthly, the audience loved set speeches. Euripides in particular wrote some superb debates; there is a notable one between Helen and Hecabe in *The Women of Troy*. But apart from this the climax of many plays consists in a Messenger's speech, reporting with considerable eloquence an event which has taken place off-stage. For although the essence of tragedy is *drama* — something done or acted, not spoken—in Greek tragedy the most searing moments were not enacted in view of the audience. Gloucester is blinded on stage, Oedipus is not.

The chorus was originally fifty in number, and all took part in the whole tetralogy. But it was a considerable strain to expect all fifty to perform through a sequence of four plays. So Aeschylus took the step of dividing them into four groups of twelve with two reserves. Now each of the twelve chorus members performed only once in a single play.

Fifty in the chorus made possible a 5 x 10 pattern or a 7 x 7 pattern with a chorus-leader apart. A twelve-person chorus left a basic 3 x 4 or 2 x 6 pattern. Sophocles increased the chorus to fifteen, that is, 3 x 5 with the chorus-leader, or without him 2 x 7, and this remained standard practice throughout the second half of the fifth century. The chorus was originally the centre of the drama. In all the surviving plays they are a part of the action, and in some plays, from Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Women* to Euripides's *The Women of Troy*, they are the action. They had to act, and the leader was expected to engage in dialogue with the actors. They had also to sing and dance to simple music. We know little of the dancing, but the singing was solo or unison, the accompaniment provided by a single recorder, with occasionally a small harp or lyre, and in Euripides's *The Bacchants* tambourines for special effect. The choral lyrics are divided into matching pairs of verses: strophe and antistrophe, often with a single verse at the end called an epode. The names suggest that in the strophe the chorus danced round the orchestra clockwise, in the antistrophe anti-clockwise and in the epode faced front. Sometimes the rhythms give us a clue to the dance. Anapaests in 4/4 time (♩♩𝅗𝅥: short-short-long, roughly 'in a pair') are used for formal entries, more excited rhythms represent more exciting dance-movements, and in *The Bacchants* we have the authentic rhythms of the maenads on the mountain. We know of some standard dance-movements, like the 'fire-tongs', involving the quick crossing of the feet still practised spectacularly by the modern ballet-dancer. We must not forget that Greek tragedy is a combination of drama, opera and ballet, and that we have lost the music and choreography.

The costs of production were met by some wealthy citizen who would gain correspondingly in prestige by a successful production; the cost was about thirty minas or 3,000 drachmas (see your *Anthology*, A 11).[1] By the end of the fifth century war-taxes were weighing heavily on the wealthy, and the theatre was, so to speak, nationalized. Not only was direction of the play in the hands of its author, but he was originally himself an actor, but later he left acting to others (Sophocles, for example, though having the athleticism of the good actor, had a poor voice). Being responsible for training the chorus and directing the production meant he was author, composer, choreographer, producer and director.

The judgement between the competing dramatists was subject to a complex procedure. The Council drew up a list of suitable names for judges from each of the ten 'tribes' constituting the whole citizen-body. These names were placed in ten sealed urns, and deposited in the public treasury. In the course of the festival, before the presentation of the plays, the urns were brought ceremoniously from the Acropolis, the seals were examined for tampering, one name drawn from each urn, and the panel of ten judges was constituted. At the end of the three days each judge wrote down his verdict of the order of merit and placed it in an urn. The presiding official drew five of these and they determined the overall verdict. But we do not know what the judges looked for — a single outstanding play, or sustained quality over four plays; what technical qualities they expected in music and dancing and acting; how far composition or performance weighed with them. It is sometimes said that the fact that Sophocles's *Oedipus* did not receive first prize exemplifies the fallibility of human critics. It should really be said that the four plays of which *Oedipus* was one did not receive first prize as they were produced on one particular occasion, and as we know nothing of the production, nothing of the accompanying plays, and nothing of the rival productions, it tells us nothing of the fallibility of the judges in question.

It remains astonishing that Athens, a town the size of Leicester in 1946, should in the space of some seventy years have produced three of the six greatest tragic dramatists the world has seen: for who can be put alongside them but Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov?

Revision Exercise C

(a) How were tableaux from inside the building presented?

(b) Where did characters enter if they were coming from (i) country (ii) town?

(c) Did the supposed action of a Greek tragedy take place within the confines of a single day?

(d) How many speaking actors were used in a single tragedy?

(e) How many in the chorus in any one play at the beginning, middle and end of the century?

(Answers on p.69)

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[1] Ferguson, J. and Chisholm, K. (eds.) (1978) *Political and Social Life in the Great Age of Athens*, Ward Lock Educational/The Open University Press (Course Reader), hereafter cited as *Anthology*.

2.2 KEY DATES

It may be useful for you to have before you some of the key dates in Greek tragedy. The dates are those of first performances.

	Aeschylus		**Sophocles**		**Euripides**
525	Aeschylus born				
		496	Sophocles born		
				480	Euripides born
472	*The Persians*				
		468	First victory		
467	*Seven Against Thebes*				
463?	*The Suppliant Women*				
458	*The Oresteia*				
457/6	*Prometheus*				
456	Aeschylus died				
		*c.*445	*Ajax*		
		441	*Antigone*		
				438	*Alcestis*
				431	*Medea*
				428	*Hippolytus*
		*c.*427	*Oedipus*		
		*c.*415	*Electra*	415	*The Women of Troy*
				414	*Ion, Heracles*
		413	Special Commissioner	413	*Electra* (? written earlier) *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*
				413/412	*Helen*
		409	*Philoctetes*	408	Euripides goes to Macedon *Orestes*
		406	Sophocles died	406	Euripides died *The Bacchants* *Iphigeneia in Aulis*
		401	*Oedipus at Colonus*		

2.3 SOPHOCLES AND THE COURSE

Before we go further I should explain why we are not treating Sophocles in detail in this course. For many people he is the greatest of all the tragedians: it seems, and is, odd to neglect him.

The simple fact is that we had to make a choice. Our choice was affected by the knowledge that in the drama course (A307) there are none of the seven surviving plays of Aeschylus, two of the seven of Sophocles, two of the eighteen of Euripides, and no comedy. We therefore determined to lay before you the only surviving trilogy, which is by Aeschylus, and a comedy. This left room for only one more play, and it seemed better to take a third play of Euripides. In this way those of you who take both courses will have a fair conspectus of the land-marks of Greek tragedy. Those of you who do not take A307 will have had a resonable grounding in the study of Greek tragedy, and can go on to read Sophocles for yourselves.

Sophocles is not to be forgotten. He built on Aeschylus's foundations, introduced scene-painting, and, as we have seen, the use of a third actor and, seemingly, in his last play, a fourth. He was not too proud to learn from younger men, and he acquired from Euripides some melodramatic twists in his later days. He is a master of dramatic art: *Oedipus the Dictator (Oedipus Tyrannus)* is usually cited as the greatest of all Greek tragedies for the skill with which the plot is handled. You will find a masterful passage of dramatic irony in Section 7.1.