
UNIT-1 EARLY CLASSICAL THEATRE

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVE

In this unit you will learn about "Classical Greece"

- Why is it historically important?
- What people thought as much as what they did?
- What the Greeks of the Classical Age deserve credit for is an intellectual culture that resulted in remarkable innovations?
- Together with humanistic art, literature, and a new focus on the rational mind's ability to learn about nature and to improve politics and social organization.
- What the Greeks had never done, however, was spread that culture and those beliefs to non-Greeks?

1.1 INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF CLASSICAL GREEK DRAMA

According to Aristotle, the Athenians developed tragedy first, with comedy following a generation or so later. While this assessment is essentially correct, the truth seems to have been somewhat more complicated. Comic dramas as opposed to comedy itself—that is, humorous plays versus the formal genre of "comedy"—appear to have evolved alongside their tragic counterpart, perhaps even before it. The satyr play, in particular, a farcical rendition of myths more often treated seriously which featured a chorus of rowdy, irreverent satyrs (half-human half-animal spirits of the wilderness notorious for their lust and gluttony), emerged early in the tradition of Greek theatre, though exactly how early is not clear. Nevertheless, the historical sources for theatrical performances in the Classical Age focus largely on tragedy as the hub of early dramatic activity, even if its pre-eminence probably looks clearer in hindsight than it seemed in the day.

Three tragedians emerge from the fifth century BCE as the principal practitioners of classical Greek tragic drama: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Theirs are the only tragedies preserved whole. First and foremost, Aeschylus lived a generation earlier than the other two so his work provides our first hard look at Greek drama. If to modern viewers his plays seem static and slow-moving, there can be little doubt they were exciting and controversial in their day.



The elder of the later pair, Sophocles is often seen as the best playwright of the three—in the general estimation of many in the scholarly community, Sophocles remains the finest exponent of tragic arts ever—and certainly his polished dramas were very well-respected in the Classical Age, as they have been for the most part ever since. It is somewhat ironic to note, then, that interest in his drama in performance seems to have waned fairly soon after his lifetime.

Conversely, Euripides, while alienating his contemporaries and considered by many a distant second to Sophocles when the two of them were alive, left behind a body of drama which commanded the stage after the Classical Age. There can be little doubt why: Euripides had a knack for putting on stage eye-catching situations and creating memorable characters with extreme personality disorders. Accordingly, theatrical records show that his works were very frequently produced in later ages, outstripping both Sophocles and Aeschylus.

No Greek tragedy from the fourth century or later (the Post-Classical Age) has been preserved intact, making it hard to determine the course of tragic drama in Greece after the lifetime of Sophocles and Euripides ([note](#)). We can, however, follow the evolution of its close kin, comedy, in later Greek theatre.



The presentation of humorous material has deep roots in ancient Greece, perhaps as old as tragedy itself, but because comedy was seen as a lesser art form until quite late in the evolution of Western Civilization, the evidence for this genre of drama is scant. Historical records make it clear skits designed to provoke laughter were being written throughout and even before the Classical Age—comedy officially premiered at the Dionysia at some point during the 480's BCE, between the Persian Wars—and this type of theatre, now termed "Old Comedy," gained popularity steadily across the fifth century. In particular, it began to attract widespread attention during the Peloponnesian War when productions of comedy provided the Athenians much needed relief from the anxiety and sorrow of their conflict against Sparta.

While the names of several exponents of this genre in the fifth century are preserved, and in some cases fragments of their work as well, the plays of only one Old Comedy playwright, Aristophanes, have come down to us complete. His drama—and presumably that of his predecessors and contemporaries, too—was primarily built around current events and issues. Indeed, all indications point to political and social satire as the hallmark of Old Comedy, especially toward the end of the Classical Age. Later, however, after the end of the Peloponnesian War, as Greece moved into the Post-Classical period, comedy underwent a major transformation. From ridiculing celebrities and the regime in power to focusing on the lives and lifestyles of less prominent people, comic drama evolved toward the end of the fourth century (the 300's BCE) into a new and very different-looking type of entertainment. Out of the ashes of civil war and Alexander's conquests and the many desperations of the upper-middle class was born the "sit-com."



The master of this "New Comedy" was Menander, heralded by at least one ancient critic as an author unsurpassed in quality. However, for reasons having nothing to do with his brilliant stagecraft, his work did not survive the Middle Ages. Fortunately, the sands of Egypt have rendered up several of his plays, albeit in "rags and patches" but well enough preserved for us to see what his drama looked like. Character-driven, highly stylized pieces with recurring characters and inclined toward subtle rather than broad humor, Menandrian New Comedy in more ways than one marks the beginning of modern drama.

1.2 THEATRON

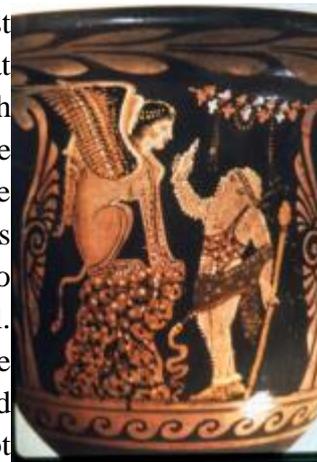


The physical remains of Greek theatre from the Classical Age are pitifully few, making it a treacherous enterprise to reconstruct the theatre spaces, sets, costumes, music or any of the material features of theatre in the great age which fostered Greek tragedy (the 400's BCE). Thus, what is known about theatre in the century before that, the 500's BCE, the age when drama itself first emerged, is a veritable blank. Most Greek theatres visible today around the Mediterranean basin were constructed after the Classical Age, while those few which belong to the earliest periods of theatre evolution have almost universally been renovated in later periods of antiquity, leaving them dubious sources of information about classical theatre. That is, they constitute "secondary sources," for the most part.

Our data concerning classical stage practices, such as acting styles, costumes, musical accompaniment and the like, are in general equally unclear. Though some historical sources seem to provide reliable information about the performance of classical tragedy, the modern appreciation of these data still relies heavily on the fifth-century dramas that happen to have survived. To make matters worse, ancient theatre was in its customs and practices a rather fluid enterprise, and what rules applied to one period—or even one decade!—may not necessarily have applied to another. As a consequence, the discussion below is an attempt to review the highlights of an issue clouded by mystery and delve into a few of the better attested theatre practices of the Classical and Post-Classical period.

A. Festivals and the Nature of Ancient Performance

For some time—until the first half of the fifth century, at least (ca. 450 BCE)—all drama appears to have been presented at the **City Dionysia**, the annual Athenian festival held each spring in honor of the god Dionysus. While it's clear that there was a competition held there among dramatists in which the work of one of them was awarded "first place," much else is uncertain, such as the number of tragedians each year who wrote how many plays distributed over how long a festival. The figures seem to have varied over the course of the century. That tragedies would later be packaged into **trilogies**—that is, groups of three plays connected by plot or theme (or both)—with a comic **satyr play** appended afterwards has led some scholars to retroject this tradition back to the earliest days, but the validity of that supposition is impossible to determine given the paucity of information within our grasp.



What *is* clear is that among the ancient Athenians interest in theatre as an art form rose precipitously from the end of the Pre-Classical Age (ca. 500 BCE) and continued to grow steadily over the course of the fifth century. For instance, in the 440's BCE another competition among tragic and comic dramatists was instituted at a subsidiary festival held in honor of Dionysus, the **Lenaea**, a strictly intra-Athenian affair occurring in mid-winter (late January). By the post-classical period (after 400 BCE), all sorts of festivals had started to incorporate drama into their festivities whether they had a natural connection with theatre or not. Clearly, the popularity of theatre made it attractive to a wide range of cults as a way of catering to the public. It comes as no surprise, then, that Greek plays began in this age to be exported all over the ancient world, laying the foundation for not only theatre as a key feature of ancient Western Civilization but also Greek as the "common" (*koine*) language of international commerce in this region.



The performance spaces of classical antiquity are enormous by today's standards, closer in size to modern sports stadiums than the sorts of theatres with which we are most familiar. Outdoors and most often situated on steep slopes that curve around the playing area, many ancient theatres were capable of housing thousands of spectators. These *theatra* (the plural of *theatron*)—the Greek

word originally referred only to the seating area in a theatre, as was noted in Chapter 1—call for a certain style of performance. In order to be heard, for instance, the ancient actor had to have a strong **voice**. Likewise, costumes, sets and movement also needed to be visible from and intelligible at great distances. Unlike modern realistic plays which for the most part call for intimate, indoor theatre spaces with controlled lighting, ancient drama had more the feel we associate with large-scale athletic events.

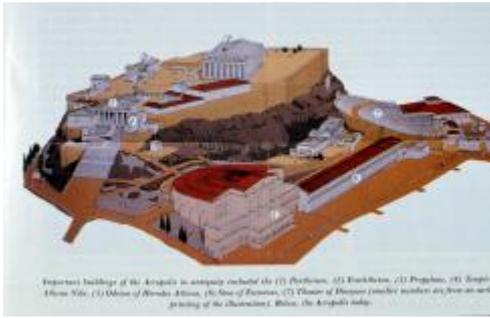
Actually, if the ancient Greeks had compared drama to anything in their day, it would probably have been **courtroom trials**. Lawyers back then were seen as "actors" of a sort inasmuch as they provided some of the more sensational and theatrical moments in Greek history. Often pleading cases before thousands of people and hardly shy about dramatizing their appearance in



court, orators in antiquity rarely hesitated to allude to drama during litigation, one at least even going so far as to quote tragedy at some length as if he were an actor. In fact, the ancient Athenians fairly often used their large, centrally located acting venue, the **Theatre of Dionysus**, as the site of important trials. So, if theatre seemed like anything to the ancient Greeks, it was most likely a lawsuit and, as such, Greek drama imports at times a distinctly litigious atmosphere where characters appear to prosecute each other, appealing on occasion to the audience as if it were a jury. Nor is this at all out of line with reality since most of the Athenian spectators would have served as jury-members at some point during their lives, some watching the play from the very same seats in which they had sat as jurors.

In that light, the ancient Greeks saw little reason for maintaining an invisible "fourth wall" or building characters with **interiority** (i.e. psychological subtlety effected through subtext), features conventional in modern theatre. Instead, **presentationalism** and overt grandeur typify Greek theatre and drama. Like the trials and public spectacles which Greek drama so often resembles—and which it surely shaped, in turn—ancient theatre in Greece had little choice but to meet the enormity of the arena it played in. And so it did, in high style, especially in the hands of its greatest exponents. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the ancient *theatron* and its close kin, the courtroom, shared a long-standing tradition of showmanship. In other words, the ancient Greeks would have felt right at home watching any of the sensational trials televised today, especially the prosecution of celebrities, and would probably have watched Senate hearings on CSPAN in far greater numbers than we do.

B. The Theatre in the Classical Age

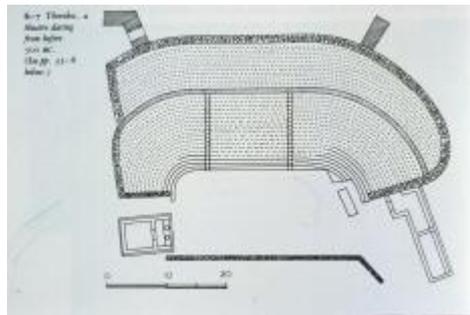


The primary and primordial performance space in ancient Athens and the home of the City Dionysia was the Theatre of Dionysus. Built into the slopes of the **Acropolis** where it could utilize the natural terrain to create seating, this "instrument for viewing" is, if not the actual birthplace, certainly the cradle of Western drama. But its exact structure in the Classical

Age is impossible to determine. It was substantially refurbished twice in antiquity, once in the later fourth century (300's BCE) and once again in Roman times, making it unlikely that a single stone visible in the theatre today was there in the Classical Age. Thus, it is improbable any of the classical tragedians would recognize much of the theatre we see now other than its location.



For instance,



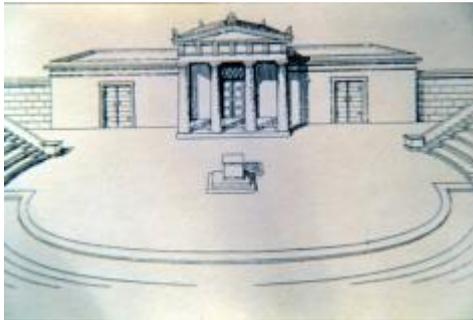
the **orchestra**—"dancing place" (literally, "instrument for dance")—of the Theatre of Dionysus, the flat area at the bottom of the theatre where the chorus sang and danced, is today circular. In the fifth century BCE, however, it was more likely rectangular. This assertion is based on two, albeit scanty, pieces of information. First, ancient choral dances were "rectangular," which a rectangular space would suit better.

Second, the only known theatre which has remained unchanged from that day, the **Theatre at Thorikos**—Thorikos was an Athenian *deme* ("district, borough")—has a rectangular orchestra with only its corners rounded. Nevertheless, it is not certain that the Theatre at Thorikos was used as a space for performing drama, or just a public meeting ground. In sum, it is hard to speak definitively about the physical nature of the Theatre of Dionysus as it existed in the Classical Age, except to say that it was a large structure capable of housing crowds which were huge even by modern standards.

1. The *Skene*

Still, it is possible to make a few conclusions. For instance, from the very dawn of Greek drama there was probably a backstage area of some sort, into which the actors could retire during a show and change costume. There is no ancient theatre extant which does not preserve or have room for the remains of a "backstage" of some sort. The Greeks referred to this part of the theatre as the *skene* ("tent"), recalling, no doubt,

its origins as a temporary structure, perhaps even an actual tent into which the first actors of antiquity withdrew during performance.



The situation is not that simple, however. For instance, Aeschylus' earliest plays (*Persae*, *Suppliants*, *Seven Against Thebes*) were produced in the Theatre of Dionysus—they are the oldest Greek tragedies preserved entire—but they do not call for any permanent structure on stage. Thus, it is not clear that the Theatre of Dionysus prior to the 460's BCE had any building as such on stage; in that case, the *skene* could have been merely a "tent." So, we can be certain that the Theatre of Dionysus had a permanent *skene* building only *after* the first decades of the Classical Age.

On the other hand, mask and costume changes which all of Aeschylus' dramas entail require some sort of structure into which the actor can briefly retire out the audience's sight during performance. That Aeschylus' later plays do indeed call for a *skene* building with a roof strong enough to hold an actor standing on top of it, as in the opening scene of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy), shows that by at least 458 BCE there must have been some type of *skene* building in the Theatre of Dionysus. However, its architectural style and specific dimensions lie outside of our understanding at present.

Other dramas preserved from the Classical Age shed a bit more light on the nature of the *skene* building in the Classical Age. For instance, they show that it must have had at least one door, because several fifth-century tragedies call for actors to enter from a building or for the chorus to pass from the orchestra into the *skene* building. Therefore, there was not only a backstage structure of some sort but relatively easy access between it and the area where the chorus danced. Furthermore, as noted above, the roof of the *skene* building must have been flat and strong enough to support at least one actor's weight—and two or more by the end of the Classical Age—so it follows that there had to have been stairs or a ladder inside the *skene* leading up to the roof.

But, unfortunately, this is really all we can said with certainty about the ancient *skene*. That surviving classical dramas do not refer to it often or call for its extensive utilization argues it was not particularly complex in its design or application. If true, perhaps, of the Classical Age, the same did not apply to the post-classical Greek world. By that time the "tent" was being used to depict a play's setting through a process the Greeks called *skenographia* ("tent-drawing," implying some sort of painted backdrop) from which comes our word "scene" in the sense of scenery. So, even if the *skene* started out as a weak presence in classical theatre, it grew later, in the fourth century BCE, into an elaborate structure and, without doubt, represents the beginnings of set design.

C. Special Effects

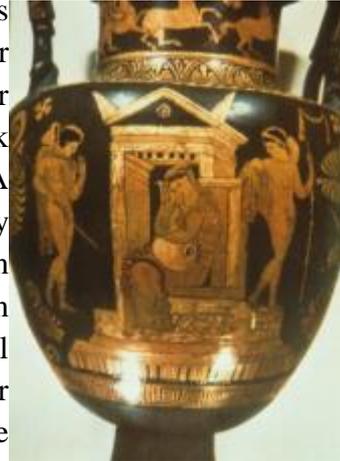
Other requirements of the theatre called for in classical drama shed further light on the nature of the Theatre of Dionysus in the fifth century BCE. Several classical tragedies, for instance, require that the *skene* building open up and reveal an interior scene. The device used for this was called by the Greeks the *ekkyklema* ("roll-out"), presumably a wheeled platform on which an interior scene could be set and then "rolled out" from the *skene* building through the main door into the audience's view. Because Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BCE) appears to call for such a revelation, the *ekkyklema* probably came into use during the first half of the fifth century BCE, which makes it one of the earliest special effects on record.

Yet other classical plays call for an even more spectacular effect, for actors to "fly" into the theatre. Ancient sources report that this was done using a device called the *mechane* ("machine"), a crane which could lift actors over the *skene* building and suspend them up in the air by a rope. But the history of the *mechane* is more problematical than that of the *ekkyklema* and raises several important questions which are unfortunately unanswerable. When was the *mechane* first used? How did the actor suspended in the air keep from twisting around on the rope? Was the *mechane's* arm (the crane itself) hidden when it was not in use, or did the ancients even care if it was kept out of general sight? In either case, where was it placed? Finally, how was it weighted so that it was manageable? There are no clear answers to any of these questions, though we can make some educated guesses.

First, the *mechane* was probably introduced fairly late in the Classical Age, since no extant play dating before the late 420's BCE absolutely requires it. The late 430's BCE would be a safe guess. Second, there *are* simple ways to keep an actor from spinning around on the rope—for instance, by tying another rope to his back—but this is pure speculation. The last two questions—could the audience see the *mechane* when it was not in use? and how did the crew manage it?—are crucial because they pertain to another issue central in theatre history: how illusionistic was the classical Greek theatre? That is, did the Athenian audience see the action on stage as realistic, or was it to them a stylized presentation whose art and merit were not bound up in how natural and real-looking the dramatic vision appeared? There are no immediate or easy answers to these questions, but if we had greater knowledge of the *mechane*, it would certainly help to illuminate this and other fundamental issues about the evolution of ancient drama.

D. What Greek Tragedy Looked Like: The Finale of Euripides' *Orestes*

What is more certain and what we can see for ourselves is how classical playwrights utilized the *mechane* and other devices, and also the Theater of Dionysus as a whole. Their dramas, at least, give our speculations a guiding framework and become a laboratory of sorts for our reconstructions. A good example is Euripides' *Orestes*, his most frequently revived play in post-classical antiquity—so we are told in the ancient notes appended to this play—and a case study in extreme behaviors, psychotic personalities and theatrical brilliance. The finale of this tragedy shows how a master dramatist can utilize the stage tools at his disposal to create an gripping, panoramic crescendo of action in the classical theatre.



The play deals with the aftermath of **Orestes'** murder of his mother **Clytemnestra**, a famous saga in Greek myth. In the course of Euripides' play, Orestes is driven to despair because no one will help defend him, including the god Apollo who had originally ordered the young man to commit matricide, or so Orestes claims. When even his uncle Menelaus refuses assistance, Orestes at last goes insane, seizes Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen who had caused the Trojan War, and kills her—or seems to, because the report of her death is inconclusive—and then, to ensure his own safety, Orestes kidnaps Menelaus' daughter Hermione, his cousin, and holds her hostage.



The end of the play is a study in the possibilities for producing spectacle in the Theatre of Dionysus. Euripides gradually fills the stage with characters one level at a time, literally from bottom to top. Eventually every possible acting space and virtually every resource at the disposal of a playwright in that day is in use.

The finale begins with the chorus alone on stage, singing and dancing in the orchestra at the bottom of the theatre. Next, Menelaus enters with his army, a secondary silent chorus. He—and they, too, presumably—stand on the main level of the stage before the door of the *skene* building. He demands that Orestes open the gates of the palace, but Orestes appears instead on its roof with several other characters: his sister Electra, his friend Pylades and Menelaus' daughter Hermione whom Orestes threatens to kill if her father tries to force his way into the palace. They quarrel and Menelaus gives the signal to attack. In response, Orestes orders his friends to torch the palace and kill Hermione.

Primordial chaos seems ready for its climactic close-up, when in flies the god Apollo on the *mechane*, soaring above the din and smoke. This solar deity—the divine personification of light, reason and, in this case, "better late than never"—does not, however, hover over Argos alone but has the not-dead-yet Helen, flying beside him in first class. He had just recently rescued her from Orestes' assault and turned her into a goddess so she can live with him.

The Greek stage is now packed as full as can be, with speaking characters on every level, in order from bottom to top: the chorus in the orchestra, Menelaus and his troops at the door of the *skene*, Orestes and his gang of kidnappers above them on the roof of the *skene*, and the gods, both new and old, swinging on the *mechane* over all of it. It is a very craftily orchestrated and deliberate sequence of action designed to lead to a visually stunning spectacle of pessimistic, or at least ironic, grandeur! And, if one counts the sun—which it is a safe guess was shining that day, or any day when there were plays being presented at the City Dionysia—there are, in fact, five levels of action, with the "star of stars," Apollo's ensign, beaming down impassively on all of this feeble human madness. [We will return to this tragedy [later](#). It is too theatrical and well-written to pass without a second glance.]

1.3 ACTORS AND ACTING IN ANCIENT GREECE

Thus, Euripides' *Orestes* ends with what has to be one of most breath-taking scenes in all of Greek theatre, employing every resource the Theatre of Dionysus in the Classical Age had to offer—certainly, it is hard to imagine a tragedian of this era calling for much else—still, hard as it may be to believe, Euripides has more up his sleeve than this tragic traffic-jam. To understand what that is, one must take into account the full dynamics of Greek performance. What modern audiences overlook, though ancient audiences would not have, is that there is one speaking character, or set of characters, on each level of the stage, from top to bottom: Apollo (*mechane*), Orestes (roof of the *skene*), Menelaus (stage) and the chorus (orchestra).

A. The Three-Actor Rule

This demonstrates another important facet of the classical Greek theatre. Besides the chorus, only three actors performed all the speaking roles in tragedies produced at the Dionysia, although the authorities who oversaw these celebrations of Dionysus allowed on stage any number of mute actors. These non-speaking parts were probably played by young actors-in-training whose voices were not as yet fully matured and could not project well enough to be heard throughout the enormous arenas encompassed by classical theatres.



But all known tragedies include more than three speaking characters, which means actors must have taken more than one role in a play. While on the modern stage **multiple-role-playing** may sometimes entail difficulties—audiences today who sit relatively close to the stage will naturally expect a high level of realism which may be all but impossible for the actor playing more than one role to effect—the same was not true in ancient Greece. Role-changing was perfectly practicable on the Athenian stage, not only because the majority of the viewers sat some distance from the stage but, more important, because the actors wore masks and costumes facilitating their ability to play different parts. That is to say, within the scope of a single tragedy, an actor might portray as many as five different characters, sometimes *very* different ones, with relative ease since altering his façade through a change of mask and costume was a traditional element in Greek theatre.

Indeed, extant dramas prove that the ancient Greek actor was expected to be able to impersonate the full range of humanity, from young girls to old men, by adapting his voice and mannerisms, much as is still done in various types of Asian theatre. And, as in some performance genres found there, men played all parts, male and female ([note](#)). As a result, the art of ancient acting centered around a performer's flexibility carried out with the help of the masks and costumes which hid his own face and form from the audience's view.

Furthermore, it is clear that three actors portrayed all the roles in any classical drama, a tendency today called the "**three-actor rule**." That this was, in fact, a restriction scrupulously enforced at the Dionysia is also certain, and not just because later historical sources like Aristotle allude to it, but because the surviving dramas of this period show this rule in action. In other words, the plays constitute "[primary](#)" evidence that three actors at most performed all the speaking roles in classical tragedy and satyr plays, for the simple reason that all such drama—even the surviving fragments!—require no more than three speaking characters on stage at once.



In addition, two other features of classical drama make it clear that there were only three actors playing all the roles. First, no extant tragedy staged before the end of the Peloponnesian War requires actors to share a part. That is, ancient Greek playwrights disposed the action in their dramas such that the characters assigned to any particular actor never converse on stage. That is, if one actor plays both Electra and Menelaus, those particular characters never meet and speak together in front of the audience. Second, the Greek tragedians invariably give actors a certain period of time off stage (usually the interval covered by about fifty lines of dialogue) to make mask and

costume changes. That comfort margin, so to speak, along with the other aspects of Greek tragedy mentioned above seal the case for the "three-actor rule."

Less clear is why there were only three actors. Presumably, having performers play more than one role was a traditional component of the Greek theatre, perhaps from the very inception of Greek drama when there was but one actor and a chorus. Thus, ancient audiences, no doubt, expected a certain amount of multiple-role-playing in a drama. But the reason the evolution in the number of actors stopped at three is a question for which there will probably never be a fully satisfactory answer, nor must there be only one reason for this rule. One credible explanation which almost assuredly had some force in the creation and maintenance of this restriction involves the religious element in ancient theatre, whose conservatism surely resisted change on all fronts including adding more and more actors to the stage. Equally compelling is, no doubt, the jealousy of premier performers in competition with one another for a prestigious honor at the Dionysia during the later half of the Classical Age. This must also have encouraged holding the numbers of speaking performers down. Envy among rival actors is one of the few reliable constants in the world of entertainment.

B. Voices on Stage: Dialogue and Trialogue

Whatever the reason, the three-actor rule is visible at work in the tragedies of all three playwrights, even the earliest, Aeschylus. Although he rarely has all three speaking actors on stage at once, he does so often enough—in his later tragedies, at least—that it seems likely he regularly had three actors at his disposal, or two if he himself is counted as one of the performers himself ([note](#)). It is interesting to note, then, that his characters never engage in a **trialogue**—that is, all three actors conversing in a scene—even when there are three speaking actors on stage. So, for instance, during the confrontation between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the actors portraying these two characters speak to each other. Though another actor is on stage dressed as Cassandra (Agamemnon's Trojan concubine and prisoner-of-war), that actor says not a word during this scene. Rather, he remains on stage silent for a long time and only finally speaks two scenes later. Thus, in the scene where Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have their dialogue, Aeschylus does, in fact, put three speaking actors together on stage, even if they do not all join in the same conversation and engage in a trialogue.

Why *doesn't* Aeschylus have all three actors speak together in that or any scene? Close examination of the nature of Attic theatre and the ramifications of its conventions pertaining to performance provides several good reasons for this. First and foremost, it is important to remember drama was a new art form in Aeschylus' day. It had most likely grown from a one-man show with a chorus as back-up—in the earliest recorded stages of tragedy, there is no mention of actors, only a playwright and a chorus, which supports the supposition that playwrights originally performed all the speaking character parts—to a two-performer and then a three-performer arena. From our perspective, this transition seems simple but in the day a play with so many actors on stage at the same time must have looked like a three-ring circus, especially to an

audience accustomed to having only one "voice" present all the characters in a story, the way Homer and all epic poets did.

As a result, a conservative approach to dialogue is visible in Aeschylus' plays where, any time two characters have a dialogue, the situation is always carefully managed. For instance, the action leading up to a dialogue in an Aeschylean drama tends to proceed in the following manner: each of the speaking characters is brought in separately, they deliver discrete monologues (often punctuated by choral interjections), and only after some time do they at last exchange words back and forth. This cautious approach, as the playwright makes sure that the audience has heard both the actors' voices and understands the two characters' distinct points of view, confirms that in the early Classical Age the audience required some preparation before a conversation could take place on stage.

Historically, this makes sense as well. If we can believe Aristotle who claims the second actor was the invention of Aeschylus, dialogue of this sort did not exist until the 490's BCE at the earliest. Seen that way, playwrights in the earliest phases of Greek drama would have resembled the epic poets who dominated public performance in the Pre-Classical Age, except that these playwright-bards had a chorus behind them and dressed to fit the roles they were impersonating instead of merely narrating what happened or was said. Epic poets, after all, could not have performed dialogue the way it was done in tragedy since only one of them performed at a time. Nor could playwrights in the earliest phase of tragedy, until the day Aeschylus introduced the second performer and the first actor-to-actor dialogue.

Yet to have the capability of doing something in the theatre is one thing and to carry it off on stage is another. The audience must be able to follow what transpires on the stage and enjoy it, or what is the point? The glaring realism of a stage dialogue surely appeared quite startling to Aeschylus' audience, accustomed as they were to a solo poet supplying all the individual characters' voices in a performance. To have a pair of men doing this would have looked to an ancient audience like there were two epic poets performing at once, a wonderful notion but also a situation fraught with the possibility of confusing audience members about what exactly was unfolding before their eyes. That explains why Aeschylus is invariably circumspect in approaching dialogue. He must be careful not to lose his audience in the course of the performance, for instance, by having two characters walk on stage speaking in rapid exchange, something which would almost certainly have over-taxed his audience's ability to follow what was being said on stage and by whom.

Another aspect of tragic discourse supports the view that the spectators of early Greek theatre needed help in following any discourse significantly more complex than a simple exchange of speeches. As poetry, the rhythms of dialogue in tragedy were somewhat predictable to the audience, especially if changes of speaker occurred at breaks in the poetic meter, the way, in fact, they regularly do in classical tragedy. That is, typically one character speaks a single full line of meter, and the other says the next and then the first another and so on, in a type of interchange called **stichomythy** (in

Greek, *stichomythia*, "line-talking"). This clear and predictable pattern of exchanges of dialogue line by line helped the ancient audience understand which character was talking at any given moment, because they knew in advance when one character would stop speaking and the next one would begin.

Stichomythy is also a natural product of the venue in which it played. The size of the theatres in which Greek dramas were presented put most spectators some distance from the action—add to that the fact that the actors were wearing masks so that, even if seated close to the stage, viewers could not see the performers' lips moving—thus it's easy to understand the need for such a stylized conversation device as stichomythy. Careful preparation before a dialogue and a predictable exchange of words would have greatly improved the audience's ability to follow a conversation on stage, especially when presented with masked actors who were playing in an immense arena. Given all that, most spectators would have benefitted greatly from any help determining which character was talking at each particular moment.

And then, to have yet a *third* speaker enter the conversation would, no doubt, make the situation all but hopelessly hard to follow, certainly for an audience as new to drama as Aeschylus'. It says something for their heirs that only a generation later Sophocles' audience was apparently able to follow a trialogue. That, however, may have had as much to do with the growing talents of the performers who helped viewers grasp which character was speaking—actors with distinctive voices would have facilitated the process greatly—as with the ancient Greek audience's increasing sophistication in following theatrical conventions. Moreover, the growing general interest in theatre surely also stimulated both actors and their public to look for ways of getting around these obstacles.

Playwrights, too, may not have entirely deplored the limits imposed on them by this situation. Aeschylus' plays, for instance, show more than just a mastery of this technical aspect of his medium. Clearly he also had fun in the process of creating drama which used a restricted number of actors—close examination of his plays suggests he may even have *liked* it!—because in the aforementioned sequence of scenes that include the confrontation between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, it appears that Aeschylus is playing with his audience's expectations about how many speaking actors are on stage, indeed taunting them with the very possibility of a "third" speaking actor, which was perhaps a novelty in that day.

In particular, he toys with his audience as to whether or not Cassandra will speak. At first, in the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra confrontation, her first appearance on stage, Cassandra does not say a word. Nor does she again in the next scene, when Clytemnestra attempts to speak with her one-on-one. Although Cassandra's silence is well-motivated by the plot—she is a prophetess and sees what is going to happen, that Clytemnestra is about to kill both her and Agamemnon!—her muteness plays on another level also. What Aeschylus appears to be doing, as Cassandra refuses to speak first in one scene and then again in the next, is baiting the audience into supposing that Cassandra is not being played by a speaking actor but only a mute. After such a

prolonged silence and her pointed refusal to converse with Clytemnestra, many of those in Aeschylus' audience would, no doubt, have arrived at the conclusion she will never speak in this play because the role is not being played by a speaking actor.

But then just as this appears to be the case, Aeschylus has her at long last break into speech—actually song!—followed by an extended and moving scene on stage between her and the chorus. It is tempting to suppose some great actor-singer of the day has been hiding behind the mask and costume of Cassandra so that this character's long-delayed eruption into song is Aeschylus' ploy with which to surprise and dazzle the crowd.

This goes some way toward explaining the meaning of the verbless sentence in Aristotle's *Poetics* (4) that Sophocles, not Aeschylus, introduced the "third" actor to tragedy. If we assume, as noted above, that in glancing over Aeschylus' plays Aristotle saw that there were no overt dialogues and from that concluded Aeschylus did not use three actors, then it is easy to surmise he has failed to envision fully the action of Aeschylus' drama theatrically and has overlooked the presence of temporarily silent "speaking actors," a very different thing from true "mute actors" who portray characters that never speak on stage.

A detail found in an ancient biography of Sophocles may further corroborate the assertion that Aristotle has failed to assess the data correctly. Though replete with spurious assertions, this purported account of the great tragedian's life includes what seems to be at least one detail validated from other quarters. It suggests that the great tragedian did not act in his own plays because he suffered from *microphonia* ("small-voicedness"). Other sources, both documentary and artistic, support this general idea. For instance, Aristotle tells us that, when Sophocles acted in his own plays, he played only minor roles such as a lyre player, which makes sense if the playwright lacked a voice powerful enough to perform the great and demanding roles written for the Greek stage. In further support of Aristotle's assertion, we are also told that a famous painting in antiquity showed Sophocles playing the lyre. With such corroborating evidence there is some basis, then, for believing the biographical record is accurate about his *microphonia*. If so, it becomes easier to understand why Aristotle might credit Sophocles with introducing a third actor to the Greek stage, since in those days a man with a weak actor's voice—though it is hard to imagine anyone having a stronger *playwright's* voice!—would have to do something to compensate for such a fundamental deficiency.

So, if by "third actor" Aristotle means "third non-playwright performer," then his words can be seen as technically correct. Indeed Sophocles, because of his *microphonia*, may have been the first to bring a "third" actor on the stage, but that does not mean he inaugurated the tradition of having three speaking characters on stage at the same time. *That*, in fact, was Aeschylus' invention. Seen this way, the dramatic evidence can be brought into line with Aristotle's statement which is now valid, if needlessly terse and uncharacteristically confusing.

But there's more to Sophocles' situation than counting actors. In surrendering the stage entirely to "actors," i.e. men who performed words which others had written, he became the earliest known "modern" playwright, in the sense that he is the first dramatist we know of who watched his own plays from the *theatron*. This, in turn, goes some way toward explaining another feature of his drama, his eye for creating complex, multi-layered action on stage where silent or minor characters play important roles. This is surely the product of his being a script-writer who sat with the audience taking in the show like any other ticket-holder. That is, in imagining a play he watched it the way a spectator would, not from inside a mask as Aeschylus and all his predecessors had. So, if not an innovator in the actors' arena, Sophocles deserves credit for seeing drama from the audience's vantage point to which the compelling complexity of his stage action attests, where irony and characters in the background often comment on what's happening front and center, and sometimes even upstage it. By the middle of the century, actors were installed as a fixture in the Athenian theatre. At some point in the 440's BCE they started receiving their own awards at the Dionysia, a clear recognition of their growing role in theatre. That this began shortly after Sophocles separated playwriting and acting should come as no surprise. No longer the subordinates of a playwright who hired them so he could have a dialogue partner, actors were becoming their own independent artists, much as they are today, and without the playwright to outshine them on stage their prestige ballooned. Indeed, by the fourth century the best-known names in theatre, stars like Polos and Neoptolemos, belonged not to playwrights but actors.

Around that time, the theatre which has never been without its caste systems evolved a hierarchy of performers. Later—perhaps *much* later since we do not know the date—separate words were coined referring to the three different actors: **protagonist**, **deuteragonist** and **tritagonist**, meaning respectively "first competitor," "second competitor" and "third competitor." In post-classical Greece, these terms came to carry connotations of quality, too. So, for instance, tritagonist could imply "third-rate." But it is not clear if any of this was true in the Classical Age. Even so, we know that the discrimination among these performers goes back well into the fifth century BCE because, from the very outset of awarding actors a prize at the Dionysia, only the principal actor was granted an award, not his co-performers.

Finally, this attests to something else very important about the evolution of acting in the classical theatre. The fifth-century audience must have been able to distinguish different actors on stage even when those performers were wearing a mask on stage. In order to be able to recognize the work of an individual actor—and *only* him, not his colleagues!—his public had to have had the ability to follow him through his roles in drama. Furthermore, some classical actors were famous and well-known by name. If audiences could not distinguish them as they played a series of roles on stage, how could they come to respect and admire them? It could not have been by face or figure, the way modern actors are most often recognized, because an ancient actor's features were not visible on stage. Instead, the voice must have been the actor's principal tool, an absolute necessity in his artistic arsenal, so it must have been through their

distinctive and powerful voices that Greek actors made their mark on the world, more like today's opera singers than movie stars.

C. Producers and Sponsorship

Last but not least, the organization and sponsorship of the Dionysia and the Lenaia, the principal dramatic festivals in Athens, evolved drastically over time. While it is hard to keep track of all the changes that took place in just the first two centuries of institutional theatre at this venue, there are some constants. Until the Hellenistic period (ca. 300 BCE), playwrights and their casts were sponsored by a producer of sorts, called a *choregos* (plural *choregoi*), literally "the chorus leader," who underwrote the funding that allowed a play to reach the stage. Usually a rich man who was required by law to perform some kind of public service, the *choregos* was a producer of sorts who was handed the duty of housing and feeding the chorus for the entire duration of rehearsal and production. He also bought the costumes, props, set pieces and anything else deemed necessary for the show. It could be a very expensive endeavor, but it could also reflect well on his civic-mindedness and sense of duty to state.

Moreover, even from the earliest days of the Dionysia a winning *choregos*' name was recorded on stone memorials set up in public places, which made the expense of production a potentially good advertising investment. Quite a few of these "angels" over time put on lavish spectacles and won widespread acclaim for doing so, with which came other advantages. For example, if he fell later into some sort of legal trouble and was taken to court, a former *choregos* could remind the jury, composed largely of men who had seen "his" show, that he had once hosted a great entertainment for the state. To judge from how often such things are mentioned in the records of ancient Greek law suits, the argument must have worked.

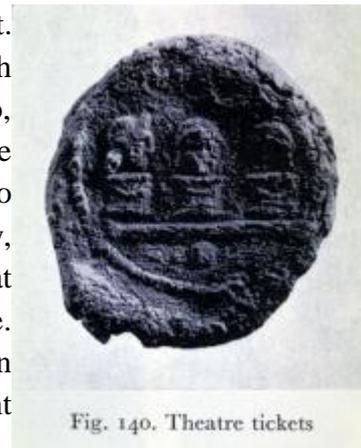


Fig. 140. Theatre tickets

The exact nature of the selection process by which playwrights and *choregoi* were brought together is not clear. Nor are any of the administrative procedures surrounding the City Dionysia, including many things we would like to know, such as the exact methods used in awarding prizes to plays. To make matters even worse, the means of matching playwright and producer seems to have changed over time, though certain features of the process stand out throughout the fifth and fourth centuries. For instance, while the *choregos* funded the enterprise, it was the playwright who was in charge of the production for the most part in the Classical Age. From early on called a *chorodidaskalos* ("chorus teacher"), the playwright apparently "taught" the chorus its songs and dances and oversaw the rehearsal process in general, even if he did not pay for it out of his own pocket.

But by the fourth century BCE, as we noted above, the playwright's role in drama had diminished greatly and actors had become the principal attraction in Greek theatre. As

such, they began to assert their will over productions. How the theatre evolved from there is even harder to reconstruct, but in general it seems safe to say that the material remains of ancient theatre and the historical sources relating to it, as well as the extant dramas themselves, show a living, evolving art form which, maddening as it is to pin down, was a vibrant and vital part of the ancient Greeks' world: an echo of their heartstrings, a mirror of their souls and a banquet for their minds..

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Artistic consideration in playwriting requires selection and arrangement. Art is skill acquired by experience, study, and clear observations. Playwright must consciously set about making choices with a competent plan and creative imagination. Only then that we consider the playwright work as a viable start to the theatrical process. Before anyone begins to write a play it is important to understand the medium for which you intend on writing. Writing for the stag demands an understanding of two fundamentals: the essence of drama and the nature of theatre.

1.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the primary focus of much of the culture of the city of Sparta?
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2. Which of the following statements best describes the historical significance of Ancient Greece?
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3. What are the primary focus of much of the culture of the city of Athens?
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UNIT-2 THE CLASSICAL AGE OF GREECE

Structure

- 2.0 Objective
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Introduction: The Persian Wars and the Beginning of The Classical Age
- 2.3 The Classical Age
- 2.4 The Peloponnesian War and the Post-Classical Age
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVE

In this unit we will learn about :

- The Greeks that came up with history in the same sense that the term is used today, namely of a story (a narrative) based on historical events that tries to explain what happened
- Why it happened the way it did?
- In other words, history as it was first written by the Greeks is not just about listing facts, it is about explaining the human motivations at work in historical events and phenomena.
- Likewise, the Greeks were the first to systematically employ primary sources.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

During the Classical Age that the Greeks arrived at some of their great intellectual and cultural achievements. The Athenian democratic experiment is, of course, of great historical importance, but it was relatively short-lived, with democratic government not returning to the western world until the end of the eighteenth century CE(!) In contrast, the Greek approach to philosophy, drama, history, scientific thought, and art remained living legacies even after the Classical Age itself was at an end.

2.2 INTRODUCTION



The Persian Wars and the Beginning of the Classical Age **Pisistratus**, the tyrant of Athens during the last half-century of the Post-Classical period, died shortly after he had instituted the City Dionysia. His sons inherited his power but, not having their father's sense of creating coalitions, were forcibly removed from power soon after 512

BCE. It is not clear what happened next, but it must be in these years of unrest and disorder (510-508 BCE) that democracy first emerged in **Athens**.

For all the changes that may seem to entail, much remained the same. The rituals and festivals, quite a few of which the tyrant Pisistratus had introduced and promoted, continued on through the chaos of massive governmental reform, the City Dionysia being no exception. By the early days of the fifth century (the 490's BCE), the Athenians had settled into their new type of government where the general populace exerted direct control of the city through assemblies and the enactment of laws, and governmental measures regularly came to reflect the will of the majority.



But this new democratic regime hardly had a chance to catch its breath before it faced the greatest crisis Greece was to confront in the early **Classical Age** (the fifth century BCE). The massive and powerful Persian Empire attacked Greece, not once but twice. These two so-called **Persian Wars** (490 BCE; 481-479 BCE) are the primary focus of Herodotus' *Histories* and make some of the most fascinating reading of all time.

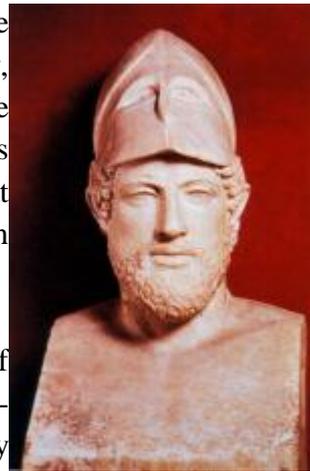
It is not possible to do the Persians Wars justice here, only to note that, grossly outnumbered and vastly out-armed, the Greeks managed in both wars to push the Persians out of Greece mainly by setting aside traditional internal differences and fighting together for their common independence. It was, no doubt, the finest hour in ancient Greece and just about the only time the Greeks made common cause in antiquity. [Click [here](#) for more information about Herodotus and the Persian Wars.]

2.3 THE CLASSICAL AGE



Athens emerged from the Persian Wars triumphant. Using their navy and merchant marine, the Athenians took control of the seas around Greece. With renewed prosperity and a keen sense of their own importance in international affairs, they set about repairing the damage incurred during the wars and extending the traditions established prior to the Persian invasion, in particular, drama, painting and architecture.

Part of the reason for this surge in the arts was the confidence born of victory and independence. In antiquity, to win a war was to gain the assurance that one's gods were pleased, which meant that the ceremonies and celebrations performed in their honor must be to their liking. From that vantage point, it only makes sense to continue and even extend them.



Thus, the Classical Age was scion and heir of a sense of righteous vigor. Led by **Pericles**, a man who had to be re-elected to office every year but who was nonetheless firmly in control of Athens for much of his life, the Athenians set about expanding their commercial interests. Wealth soon poured into the city from an alliance called the Delian League which they had formed after the war for the benefit of all Greece, but their own mostly.



This new prosperity fostered many different cultural endeavors. The **Parthenon**, for instance, rose on the site of an old wooden temple to Athena on the **Acropolis**, the natural outcropping of rock in the middle of the city. During the Second Persian War, the Persian king Xerxes had burnt the old temple to the ground, a destruction which, devastating as it was, opened the way for

a new, more modern and more elaborate shrine to the patron goddess of Athens. [Click [here](#) for more information about the Parthenon and other sacred spaces in antiquity.]

On the intellectual front, the best thinkers in the Greek-speaking world also flocked to Athens and imported a new way of looking at life dubbed **philosophy** ("love of wisdom"). At first these so-called **sophists**—the term originally meant "craftsmen"—became teachers and popular lecturers and then began to uproot the traditional modes of thought and later morality in Athens. Sophist as a moniker eventually came to be a slur implying "quack" and "charlatan," but there was no denying, at least at the outset, that these "artisans" taught valuable skills which won for their students many a law suit and much political advancement.



Underlying most of the sophists' tenets was a sense of relativism, that there is no fundamental good or bad, a dangerously cynical posture that bordered on atheism and threatened to erode the moral structures on which civil order, especially in a democratic society, depends. One sophist, the most famous, **Protagoras**, went so far as to say, "Man is the measure of all things." This maxim became the byword of the increasingly humanistic Classical Age.

The challenge presented by these sophists was met by perhaps the greatest team of thinkers in human history, **Socrates** and **Plato**. This teacher-and-student duo led the charge to set morality back on a firm foundation of strict philosophical argumentation and to counter the relativism of the sophistic movement. All cynics and sceptics since have had to face up to the dialogues of Socrates in which, as recorded by his student Plato, the master attacks various free-thinkers and debunks their wide-ranging claims that moral absolutes do not exist. It is still not clear which side won, but with this pair, staunch moralists gained a valuable and much-needed ally in the long on-going war between idealism and practicality, conviction and compromise, what ought to be versus what has to be.

2.4 THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR AND THE POST-CLASSICAL AGE



The glory of Athens grew top-heavy by the later decades of the fifth century BCE. Made greedy by the wealth they had come to expect over time, the Athenians started expanding their realm by force. In response, **Sparta** initiated a war with Athens in 431 BCE in an effort to curb the Athenians' imperialistic designs, a quest for world domination as the Spartans saw it.

This on-and-off conflict is now known as the **Peloponnesian War**—Sparta is in the Peloponnese (southern Greece) and we today see the war from the Athenians' perspective since their records preserve the history of this conflict—it was essentially a civil war among Greek city-states, ending with Sparta's defeat of Athens in 404 BCE. The ultimate result was even worse. Weakened by incessant in-fighting, all southern Greece fell to a foreign power in the next century. The lesson to be learned about the consequences of a nation's failure to achieve compromise and resolve peaceably its internal disagreements is as yet not fully understood by many world leaders today: "United we stand . . ."

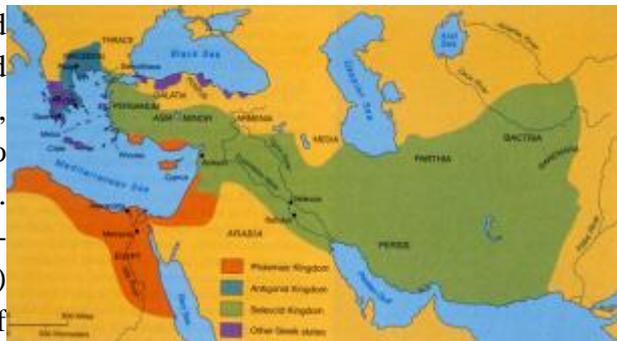
In this so-called **Post-Classical Age** (the fourth century, i.e. the 300's BCE), the Greeks squabbled among themselves, allowing the expansion of the kingdom to the north of them, **Macedon(ia)**, an area populated by Greek-speakers but ironically considered a "**barbarian**" nation by their more cultured southern kin. In Greek, *barbaros* means "foreign," purportedly from the nonsense syllables "bar bar" which is the way non-Greek languages sounded to the Greeks. During the first half of the fourth century, the Macedonians gradually consolidated their power in northern Greece and under the leadership of **Philip II**, a crafty and ruthless ruler and a general of great skill, began to extend their influence south.





In 338 BCE, Philip succeeded in defeating the combined forces of the southern Greeks—Athens, Thebes, and Sparta all fighting together for the first time since the Persian Wars well over a century before!—and reduced them to a tribute-paying protectorate of his burgeoning empire. He would surely have become one of the best known figures in history, had he not created a son whose name and glory resound through all time, **Alexander the Great**. Still barely out of his teens, Alexander not only succeeded Philip as ruler of Greece but over the course of the next decade (333-323 BCE) went on to conquer many lands, including Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Egypt, and Persia, and even made incursions into India. When he died suddenly of a mysterious ailment in 323 BCE, he left behind a very different world.

The period after Alexander is called the **Hellenistic Age**. Alexander had died without siring a legitimate heir, giving his generals *carte blanche* to seize and divide up his vast realm. These so-called *diadochoi* ("successors") inaugurated three centuries of internecine conflict in the eastern



Mediterranean area. Governed by one of Alexander's generals Ptolemy and a long line of his descendants, Egypt was the only of these "successor states" to thrive and enjoy any stability, and indeed a Hellenized ("Greek-ified") Egypt did prosper, becoming a home-away-from-home for many post-Classical Greek authors. The discovery there of thousands of **papyri** (scraps of "paper") with Greek writing on them, dating to the third century BCE onward, is evidence of the large number of Greek speakers who moved into Egypt in the Hellenistic Age. Thus, the Greeks' business interests continued to expand even after the Macedonian conquest, many becoming very wealthy in the course of their cosmopolitan commercial adventures.



But, if well-fed and secure, they were also lost and unhappy amidst their materialistic bliss. One of the consequences of Alexander's dominion was to show what a small and insignificant place Greece actually was in the larger—the *much* larger!—world. Ironically, then, as the Greeks' monetary worth rose, their sense of self-importance declined. It grew ever harder, for instance, to believe that the Greek gods who presumably controlled the whole planet—and such an expansive domain it had proven to be!—would choose to live on a cold, medium-sized mountain in northern Greece, especially when it was now widely recognized that they could reside in an excellent vacation spot like Egypt. The Olympian religion, which had

already suffered severe setbacks during the intellectual turmoil of the Classical Age, started to falter seriously.

While not wholly discarding their ancestors' religion, many Hellenistic Greeks joined foreign cults in a search for greater meaning and direction in life. Some put religious structures aside altogether and indulged in "philosophies," essentially cults based on logical argumentation but in reality belief systems of a sort. Spawned in the wake of Socrates and Plato, these philosophies dictated ways of living that could be "deduced" through proper reasoning.



The most important of these in the long run was **Stoicism**, a philosophy centering around the premise that the universe is essentially "good" and, therefore, suffering exists for the very purpose of building a better tomorrow. The "logical" response to this situation, the Stoics preached, is to distance oneself from any feelings of pain or remorse, to push aside emotion and understand that things will turn out for the better even if they do not seem that way at the moment. Thus, people should focus on their duty and ignore as much as possible the pain encountered in the passage through life. Stoicism has influenced a wide range of people then and now, from Saint Paul's conception of Christianity to Gene Roddenbery's depiction of Vulcans in *Star Trek*.

Eventually, the internal conflicts of these Hellenistic kingdoms spelled their doom. Yet another conqueror came along and took them down one by one. Unlike the Greeks, this new regime had avoided for a long time the fatal pitfall of internal bickering and thereby created the most powerful and long-lasting empire yet in Western Civilization. These conquerors were, of course, the **Romans** who began incorporating the Hellenistic Greek world into their realm around 200 BCE. Henceforth, Roman and Greek civilization would merge to form "Greco-Roman" culture, the hybrid we know as classical antiquity. [Click [here](#) for more information about the Hellenistic Literature and the Post-Classical Age.]

2.5 LET US SUM UP

The history of Greece is a tale of glory and folly, of inordinate success and incalculable waste. Perhaps because our strengths as humans almost invariably come from the same sources as our weaknesses—to wit, the blindness that leads many to be taken in by others also makes them brave in the face of overwhelming danger—the same things that had fostered the civilization of the ancient Greeks precipitated its fall, their unwavering belief in themselves and the conviction that their ways were the right ways, the best ways, and finally the *only* ways. In particular, the greed that drove the Peloponnesian War and fomented all its disasters for Athens and Greece alike was part and parcel of the Athenians' determination to improve themselves and their way of life. That is, the fire that sparked the Classical Age also incinerated it.



Likewise, the Greeks' visionary art with all its grandeur and glory is tightly bound up with the egotism that led them early on to trust their own divine instincts but then also to underestimate the power of "barbarians" and eventually fall to beings they looked down upon as inferior. The Parthenon is a perfect example of how this all worked. It is a temple designed to please the

human eye, not some god looking down from above. It is a three-dimensional reflection of the **humanism** that pervaded classical Greek thought, the soul sister of Greek philosophy which saw truth as what appealed to the mind, meaning the *human* mind. Raised out of the very bedrock of Greece, this magnificent edifice proclaims the greatness of our species and at the same time its ruins today show just how great we really are.

The Greeks built their civilization, a culture outstripping all previous ones in Western Europe, from the thin soil of their homeland, and then threw it all away fighting among themselves over those same dusty stones. In the end, their sense of self-worth was both their triumph and their downfall. It makes sense, then, that tragedy is one of their most enduring achievements.

2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write a short note on Peloponnesian War?

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2. Write a short note on the Beginning of Classical Age?

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UNIT-3 CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY

Structure

- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Sophocles
- 3.3 Sophocles and Language
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVE

In this unit we will discuss *Oedipus the king* (429-420 BCE), also known as *Oedipus Rex* or *Oedipus Tyrannos* ('Tyrannos' signifies that the throne was not gained through an inheritance) is the most famous surviving play written by the 5th-century BCE poet and dramatist Sophocles. The play is part of a trilogy along with *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The plot of *Oedipus Rex* - an old myth already known to most of the audience - was simple: a prophecy claiming he would kill his father and lie with his mother forces Oedipus - whose name means 'swollen foot' after his ankles were pierced as a child - to leave his home of Corinth and unknowingly travel to Thebes (his actual birthplace). En route he fulfills the first part of the prophecy when he kills a man, the king of Thebes and his true father. Upon arriving in Thebes, he saves the troubled city by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, then he marries the widowed queen (his mother) and becomes the new king. Later, when a plague has befallen the city, Oedipus is told that to rid the city of the plague he must find the murderer of the slain king. Unknowingly, ignorant of the fact that he was the culprit, he promises to solve the murder. When he finally learns the truth, he realizes he has fulfilled the prophecy; he blinds himself and goes into exile.

3.2 SOPHOCLES (CA. 495-406 BCE)

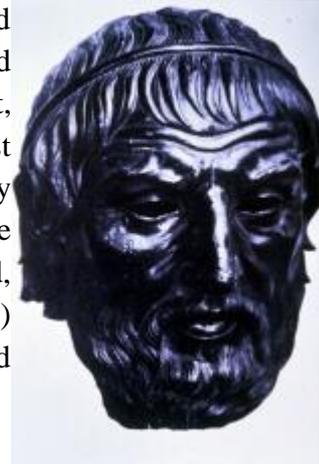
"Sophocles wrote about killing your kids and having sex with your mom and gods descending at the last second to save the day. He knew how to pull off a decent opening weekend." Joel Stein ("Spider-Man Rules"), *Time* 5/20/2002

A. Sophocles the Man

Sophocles' life encompassed almost the entirety of the fifth century BCE. Born ca. 495 BCE into a wealthy Athenian family, the young Sophocles was chosen because

of his beauty to lead the singing and dancing at the ceremony held in celebration of the Persians' defeat at Salamis. The same good fortune followed him into adulthood where, if classical Athens ever had one, he was the perennial "golden boy." For instance, as a young playwright, he defeated the veteran Aeschylus in dramatic competition—the evidence for this is found both on the Parian Marble and in a later history—and from there he went on to win an unprecedented number of playwriting victories at the City Dionysia, all this in spite of suffering from *microphonia*—that is, having a weak voice (see above)—which forced him at an early age to retire from acting in his own plays. (note)

Later in life, Sophocles also served his city as soldier and statesman, appointed as General (*strategos*) at least twice and Imperial Treasurer of Athens in 443 BCE. In addition to that, he played an important role in religion. Appointed the priest of Asclepius (the god of health), he received this deity's holy snake when it was first brought to Athens and had no temple as yet to house it. Because his counsel was widely respected, the aged Sophocles was one of the *probouloi* ("counselors") chosen to advise the Athenians after their navy was destroyed in Sicily in 413 BCE.



Indeed, all through his life, honors and awards flowed his direction, his good reputation never waning. He died in 406 BCE at an extremely advanced age, having managed to remain active artistically right up to the end. Following his death, the Athenians awarded Sophocles the highest honor a mortal could receive: he was dubbed a hero and given the name *Dexion* ("The Receiver") for having taken in Asclepius' sacred snake. Thus, living from the triumph of the Persian Wars through almost the entirety of the fifth century BCE, Sophocles' timely death spared him the horrors of witnessing the final humiliation of Athens at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War and the Classical Age. Truly a blessed and remarkable man, he was the paragon of his times, having served in his day as the ancient Athenian equivalent of Shakespeare, Picasso, Lincoln, and Rose Bowl Queen.

B. Sophocles the Playwright

Yet, for all that is known about Sophocles the man, there is remarkably little information on Sophocles the playwright. For instance, the treatise he wrote about theatre called *On the Chorus* is now lost. Aristotle, furthermore, tells us pitifully little about Sophocles' drama—as opposed to the dramatist's life—in spite of the fact that Aristotle probably had access to much more information about classical tragedy than we do.

From other sources of varying reliability, we can add a fact or two. The Greek historian Plutarch, for instance, claims Sophocles went through three phases in his career: first, a "bombastic" period—epic-like? declamatory? Aeschylean?—followed by a "sharp and artificial" period—reduced? overly clipped? anti-Aeschylean?—and finally a

period in which Sophocles' style was "best suited to expressing character"—realistic? naturalistic? Menandrian?—none of which unfortunately is particularly informative or says much about Sophocles' stagecraft. (note) Nor do the extant plays help much either, since all appear to come from the last phase, the one "best suited to expressing character," making it impossible for us to see for ourselves what really constituted these shifts in style. In the end, our best guide to assessing Sophocles as a playwright is his work itself, the seven plays that survive, meager leftovers of a once bountiful feast.

There is, however, one clear difference immediately visible in Sophocles' work which sets it apart from Aeschylus'. Sophocles is the first tragedian known to have written what modern scholars have termed **unconnected trilogies**, that is, sets of three tragedies whose plots do not revolve around a single family's saga or some sort of lore drawn from the same arc in the cycle of Greek myth. What links the unconnected trilogies is unclear today because so few of Sophocles' plays have survived and none from the same trilogy, leaving us to guess the nature of how plays in unconnected trilogies created an integrated theatrical experience for the original audience. To judge from play titles and fragments alone, it seems safe to infer, however, that tragedies of Sophocles were at best connected thematically to one another in trilogies.

But there is a larger issue at stake here. Because Sophocles is the first tragedian whose trilogies are known to have been unconnected—from which it is often and, no doubt, rightly assumed that he was also first to do so—he then set an important precedent followed by the majority of tragedians who followed him. If so, he was truly a trendsetter, in that this innovation gave the playwrights who followed in his wake the licence to cover much more mythological turf than if all trilogies had to consist of stories directly related by plot. In other words, unconnected trilogies opened the door to the staging of a much wider range of narrative, in particular, parts of the epic cycle which supported one drama well but not necessarily three. Thus, if Sophocles was the one who spearheaded this development, his descendants owed him a great debt.

We are told also that he made changes in the nature of the **chorus**, whose number he set at fifteen, though it is not immediately evident whether this represents an increase or decrease from the usual number in Aeschylus' day. It is also possible there was no fixed number prior to Sophocles and so his innovation may only be that he regularized the size of choruses. In other regards, however, he seems to have downplayed the chorus over time—choruses in Sophocles have significantly fewer lines than their Aeschylean counterparts—though the impression of a diminished role for the chorus may stem from the general tendency of classical drama through the fifth century to shift focus away from choral song and toward the interaction of the individual actors who portrayed speaking characters.

This is not to impugn the centrality and beauty of the choral odes in Sophocles' drama which make it hard to believe he actively disliked using choruses in performance—not only did he write a treatise entitled *On the Chorus*, but his skill in composing choral odes argues against any such notion—more likely, then, Sophocles simply

modulated the role of the chorus in drama from active participant in the play to ode-singing onlookers, playing up the more reflective and philosophical aspect of their dramatic potential by enhancing the esthetic quality of the lyrics they sang. This would be a natural development for the first playwright on record to sit in the audience and watch the performance a play he had written. All in all, it is better to see his modulation in the nature of the chorus' role in Greek theatre as a matter of "modernization" and not a diminution of its role on stage.

C. Character in Sophocles

Even with so few tragedies on which to base judgment, there is yet another pattern discernable in Sophocles' drama, something seen nowhere better than in his acclaimed masterpiece *Oedipus the King*. To comprehend this pattern, however, requires an understanding of Greek myth in general and dramatic myth in particular, principally that both are much more fluid than commonly thought. The popular notion today that the ancient audience came to the theatre knowing the stories of the myths they were about to witness on stage is a half truth, at best. To judge from the widely variant versions of the tales enacted in tragedy, it is clear Greek playwrights had quite a bit of latitude in their treatment of mythological stories and characters, a tendency fostered, no doubt, by the existence of rival variants of myth within traditional Greek lore itself. For instance, in one version of the Trojan War myth Helen is abducted against her will by Paris of Troy and forced to become "Helen of Troy." In another, she runs off with him voluntarily, dazzled by his good looks and his family's wealth. Depending on the particular needs of his play, an ancient dramatist could pull from either tradition, or sometimes both at the same time, as Euripides did in *The Trojan Women* where Helen and Hecuba argue over who is the real "Helen": abductee or adultress? All in all, the classical Greek audience entered the Theatre of Dionysus knowing the general parameters of the myths to be performed—Helen clearly had to go to Troy (or at least everyone thought she did), though how and why was up to the individual playwright—but the viewers were never sure what version of the myth they would see in any particular drama.

At the same time, Greek myth—and its step-child, Greek drama—was not without limitations, since certain things had come to be expected of certain characters. As a foreign witch, for instance, Medea must be willing to commit murder to get her way, or as the Roman poet Horace said:

If, for instance, you write of that time-honored Achilles—
A man not slow to act, who's angry, stubborn and bitter—
Let him say laws weren't made for him, settle quarrels with force.
Let Medea go wild, be uncontrollable. Let Ino be tearful,
Ixion treacherous, Io dazed, and downcast Orestes.

To the ancients, a timid or complacent Medea was inconceivable, nor was a mild-mannered Clytemnestra. Though she might feel guilty after killing her husband, still she had to find in herself somewhere the will to commit such an unspeakable act.

Similarly, on the day the Athenian audience approached the Theatre of Dionysus to see for the first time Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, they were surely expecting to confront a power-hungry, headstrong king who was willing to go to extreme lengths to keep his throne. According to the traditional story—no less a luminary than Aeschylus had staged this myth a generation earlier—



Oedipus discovered the terrible truth of his fate, that he had killed his father and married his own mother, fairly soon after arriving in Thebes. According to some versions of the tale, including Aeschylus' perhaps, the wicked man then decided to hide the awful fact and live and sleep with his wife and mother Jocasta—so eager to remain king, he committed incest with his own mother, knowing full well who she was!—but when she found out what had happened, she killed herself. The ensuing investigation of her suicide revealed the awful story in its entirety, and Oedipus suffered the consequences of his lust for power.

Sophocles, however, took the story in a very different direction. While still arrogant and driven, he created an Oedipus who is ignorant of the truth until very late in his reign. Only then is the whole story made known, whereupon he blinds himself and goes into exile. Instead of the traditional villain who tries to hide his shame and hang onto the throne of Thebes, Sophocles' Oedipus stands innocent of any intentional wrongdoing, at least on the surface. And when he is at long last shown to be the "most wretched of men," only then does he concede power and punish himself with blinding and exile, even though it is not exactly clear what wrong he has actually committed. In changing the timing of Oedipus' discovery of the truth, Sophocles has made him a sympathetic character, much more so than he was in Greek myth prior to this.

The same is true of other Sophoclean characters. For instance, according to traditional Greek myth, **Deianeira**, Hercules' wife, kills the great hero when he brings home another woman. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, however, Deianeira does so out of ignorance, believing that the potion she was giving Hercules would win her back his love. Instead, of course, it kills him. And like Oedipus, when she realizes what she has done, she punishes herself, in this case with suicide, out of grief and to save her good name.

Likewise, **Phaedra** in Sophocles' play of the same name—a drama now lost, but the general plot can be reconstructed from its fragments—is a lustful Cretan princess who usually emerges in Greek myth as an unsympathetic seductress, but Sophocles appears to have treated her character with rare compassion. According to standard Greek myth, Phaedra fell in love with her own stepson, the handsome hunter **Hippolytus**. In some versions of the story she makes advances on him and, when he rejects her, she angrily accuses him of rape to his father Theseus.

In Sophocles' *Phaedra*, however, she becomes entangled in a web of misunderstanding that mitigates her lechery and guilt. Believing her husband dead,

she proposes a political, not sexual alliance with Hippolytus in order to protect her children's claim to the throne of Athens. It is not Phaedra in this case but Hippolytus who is the excessive character and, interpreting her proposition as sexual, chastises her without good cause. When Theseus suddenly shows up alive, Sophocles' Phaedra panics and, like Deianeira, overreacts by accusing Hippolytus of rape. The young man dies horribly and unfairly at his father's command, and at the end of the play Phaedra kills herself in remorse, a far more pitiful—and interesting!—death than the one normally accorded this lascivious, foreign strumpet.

In some Sophoclean dramas, the converse is true. Sophocles is also known to darken typically favorable characters. **Electra**, for instance, traditionally takes the part of the faithful daughter who waits passively—as a good Greek woman, it is not her role to participate in public life—and allows her brother Orestes to claim justice by slaying their unrighteous mother Clytemnestra, or so Aeschylus portrayed her in *The Libation-Bearers* (458 BCE).

Sophocles, on the other hand, has used the same story to create a very different Electra. In his play named after her, she is a bitter and despondent woman, obsessed with her father and avenging his murder. Refusing to change her clothes and clean herself, she rails at any who approach her about Agamemnon's unrequited assassination. When her brother Orestes at last returns, she hounds him, insisting that he kill their mother and, when he finally does it, stands outside listening and abusing Clytemnestra as she cries out for help and pity. Though to many ancients Electra's cause is clearly just, the way she acts in Sophocles' *Electra* reveals the narcissistic monster lurking inside her, a beast who just happens to have right on its side. If it didn't, it would be so much easier—and infinitely more comfortable for the viewer—to condemn Electra for the Fury she is, but Sophocles' play doesn't afford such a freedom.

Perhaps clearest of all and best known these days, the title character of Sophocles' *Antigone* stands as another such self-righteous abomination. **Antigone** also hurtles forward, fueled by the force of justice, and in the process propels herself into disaster. Moreover, by carrying her sense of rectitude too far, she takes down innocent people—among them, her fiancé and his mother—in her crusade of suicidal obstinacy.

All in all, when we survey the treatment of character in Sophoclean drama, a pattern emerges. More than once, the playwright undercuts the classical audience's expectation of the way a well-known hero or villain behaves or should behave in myth. This seems clearly to be an attempt to realign—or simply complicate—the viewers' traditional sympathies. Even in what little remains of his drama, Sophocles does this often enough that it is tempting to suppose the inversion of standard character type was a recurring theme in his work, perhaps a hallmark of his drama in the Classical Age.

3.3 SOPHOCLES AND LANGUAGE

Overall, Sophocles was—and if more people could read his original works, he would undoubtedly still be—best appreciated and remembered for his exquisite command of the **Greek language**, something blunted but still visible in translation. Yet the power of his drama derives not from high-sounding, intricate poetic expressions, as Aeschylus' "drunken" verses do, but from the driving simplicity of phrases which often carry multiple meaning and are rich with irony. To wit, Sophoclean choral odes are among some of the finest poetry ever written in any tongue and, even without the music composed to accompany them, resound through the ages, shimmering with the elegance and beauty of the ideas streaming from them. Thus, readers across the ages have valued Sophocles' plays for their literary virtues as much as audiences have admired their dramatic force. That readability is, no doubt, what caught Aristotle's eye who seems to have preferred him to Euripides, in spite of the fact that the latter was clearly more theatrically marketable in the Post-Classical Age.

At times, what makes Sophocles' poetry so spectacular and compelling is hard to see from the English, but it is worth looking into since it was so patently a part of his art in its day. Let's look at just example of his word-magic. About midway through Sophocles' *Oedipus*, a messenger from Corinth enters with what he thinks is good news for the king, that Oedipus' purported father who lives in Corinth has died and so now Oedipus cannot be his father's murderer as the Delphic oracle has decreed. Gleefully, the messenger says to the chorus:

From you, O strangers, *I would like to learn where* (*mathoim' hopou*)
The house of the king is, *Oedipus'* [house] (*Oidipou*).
So call him, if you *know where* [it is] (*katisth' opou*).

The first and third lines end with phrases meaning "know where," employing two different Greek verbs for "know" (*mathoim'*, *katisth'*). The end of the second line is the name Oedipus in a form equivalent to the English possessive, *Oidipou* ("Oedipus' [house]"). That form of the name happens to have an ending which is synonymous with the Greek word "where" (*pou*), the same word used in the lines directly above and below.

Seen this way, the name takes on new meaning, because the first half of Oedipus' name (*Oidi-*) closely resembles yet another Greek verb meaning "know," *oida*. That is, Oedipus' name could be understood as "know-where," if one were to misread it as a compound of *oida* and *pou*. ([note](#)) The messenger's intentional misreading of Oedipus as "know-where" is then reinforced by the other words meaning essentially the same thing directly above and below it, so that three lines in succession appear to end with a trio of variations on "know-where" in Greek.

In other words, at this moment in the play the Corinthian messenger puns(!) on Oedipus' name—the technical term for this practice is **paronomasia**—presumably out

of joy because he believes he is bringing Oedipus good news. He is, of course, *not*. The report of the Corinthian king's death will precipitate the revelation of the greater truth that Oedipus has, in fact, killed his father and married his mother, and joy will change to horror as the king's actual biography unfolds. So, the lines are humorous, and at the same time not.

All in all, Sophocles' paronomastic word choice here conveys far more than a simple pun. By stressing "know-where" Sophocles reminds the audience who, in fact, do "know where" Oedipus is living, that Oedipus himself does not "know where" he lives or reigns or sleeps. It is a very dark kind of humor, if this sort of paronomasia can really be seen as humorous at all. ([note](#))

Such intricate use of language demands an audience whose tastes incline toward wordplay and verbal delicacies, a fact almost certainly true of the Athenian audience in the Classical Age, but apparently not of their immediate descendants in the fourth century. There is less evidence than one might expect for the production of Sophocles' plays on stage after his lifetime—in that regard, his colleague and rival Euripides whose tragedies appear to have been staged more often after the fifth century must be given the first prize—perhaps Sophocles' exquisite use of classical Greek did not bear up well in later ages when the language had evolved and tastes in general shifted toward more sensationalistic and spectacular forms of entertainment.

In any case, it would be pointless to export such rich language to non-Greek-speaking audiences who could never be expected to "know where" Sophocles was coming from. In such a circumstance it is remarkable that, absent the theatre and society into which it was born, Sophoclean drama survived at all. Much credit and tribute must go to the power behind his words after their innate beauty fell largely out of reach. Granted, it was a survival that relied more on the libraries and schoolrooms of antiquity than the stage, and in a corpus tragically trimmed to a mere seven favorites. In the next chapter, as promised before, we will see finally why.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

Oedipus Rex is the story of a nobleman who seeks knowledge that in the end destroys him. His greatness is measured in part by the fact that the gods have prophesied his fate: the gods do not take interest in insignificant men. Before the action of the play begins, Oedipus has set out to discover whether he is truly the son of Polybus and Merope, the king and queen who have brought him up. He learns from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, the most powerful interpreter of the voice and the will of the gods, that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His response is overwhelmingly human: he has seen his moira, his fate, and he can't accept it. His reaction is to do everything he can, including leaving his homeland as quickly as possible, to avoid the possibility of killing Polybus and marrying Merope.

3.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What do you mean by Paronomasia?

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2. Write a short note on Sophocles and Language?

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<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/061gkthea.htm>