

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GREEK TRAGEDY

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Abstract: This paper tries to search into the constantly developing traits of Greek tragedy that has gone through so many twists and turns starting from the earliest history of Greek drama till date.

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The genesis of earliest Greek tragedy is quite incomprehensible, but it has been possible to extract a few clues of how 'Tragōidia', or 'goat song' –the earliest form of tragedy came about and developed. Some historians suppose that this expression 'Tragōidia' originates from the death-cries of goats at sacrifice. The ancient Greeks worshipped the god Dionysus, who was the god of wine, who also represented agriculture, culture, law and theatre. His intention was to persuade mortal man to be freed from his usual self, by wine, madness or ecstasy. Dionysus was an earthy creature, symbolized by the bull, the serpent, ivy and wine. Ruled by a gut feeling, he was honoured by the ancient Greeks in form and whilst accompanied by satyrs in the heavens, while on earth he was often worshiped through ritual processions led by men dressed as satyrs, with much feast, drinking, shamelessness and the sacrifice of animals, generally goats, though sometimes also human. The emotion was termed a 'Bakkheia' and its celebrants were termed as the 'Bacchae'. The consequences of their jubilant freedom became fatal when, after many attempts to achieve the correct mental state, they ultimately succumbed to a true bacchanal trance, in which state they unintentionally murdered a farmer. The narrator, Richard, was eliminated from the bacchanal but hears about the incident later.

This ritual bakkheia eventually became known as a tragōidia, or goat song. Even though these Dionysian rituals stretched back to seventh century BC and beyond, and by the fifth century, they had developed into a more ordered form, called the Dithyramb.

Dithyrambs formed the major part of the festival in honour of Dionysus, called the Dionysia, which was held for five days in March. They were composed by poets, who usually recounted some tale from the life of Dionysus. This formed a competition, where tribes would each enter in two teams, one of men and another of boys. This competition was performed on stage by a chorus of twelve to fifteen singers. Sometimes this number went up to as many as fifty.

The dithyramb gradually developed to let one singer (or choragus) to set up a solo part, differentiating him from the rest of the chorus. Now the choragus could sing lyrical questions to the rest of the chorus, which then answered him jointly as a group. Though still in song, this was the basis of a conversation and the beginning of drama, as we know it. This new form of drama became trendy and the winning groups were widely noted and honored, though the poet who had written the piece remained mostly unknown. Aristotle describes:

“[Tragedy] arose from the leaders of the dithyramb... Tragedy was gradually enhanced as people developed each new aspect of it that came to light.”

[Aristotle, 1996, Poetics, Trans. Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics Atkins, JWH, 1943, English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase, Cambridge, pg -8]

Aristotle tells us that the dithyramb developed into something new, the tragedy, although the dithyramb continued in its original form for some years, the new tragic dithyramb, or tragedy, was very trendy with contemporary audiences.

In due course, this developed into a big occasion, despite the fact that it continued to be a competition. Here three playwrights performed three tragic dithyrambs and one comedic satyr play each, and after that another competition of five comedies. Three playwrights ruled over the genre of tragedy between the 6th and the fifth century BC, namely Aeschylus,

Sophocles and Euripides, who obtained positive reception for their works, performed at the Dionysia. These works in themselves became cherished objects, being sold to wealthy persons and public libraries.

Aeschylus (525-456 BC) has been called the father of tragedy as he was the first of the three great playwrights to write for the Dionysia, and was also the first to change the structure of the dithyramb, as observed by Aristotle:

Most importantly, Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two,

Secondly, reduced the choral parts and

Thirdly, made the spoken word play the leading role.

With adding of an extra actor to the piece, Aeschylus allowed the choragus and second actor to make conversation without involving the chorus, whose responsibility became steadily smaller, being used mainly to move the story in the forward direction and supply necessary flashbacks.

The choragus and second actor now acted their parts, with only the chorus singing. It is considered that Aeschylus wrote more than seventy plays, of which only seven complete tragedies could survive including *The Suppliants*, *The Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *The Oresteia* (a collection of three individual plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*) and *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus came at the city Dionysia in 484 BC and he continued to be triumphant until 458 BC. Tragedy had by then turned out to be an altogether more dignified and fulfilling experience.

Sophocles (496 BC – 406 BC) was the second of the three great tragedians, writing more than one hundred and twenty-three plays during his lifetime of which only seven could be survived: *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Philoctetes*, *Electra*, *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *The Trachiniae*, and *King Oedipus*. Sophocles further developed the art form of tragedy:

1. The third actor and scene painting were introduced by Sophocles.
2. The magnitude increased from short plots, and
- 3 In place of comic diction, as a result of a change from satiric style, tragedy acquired dignity at a late stage.
4. The extra actor allowed greater character development and conflict could now be explored in-depth.
5. Female characters, such as *Antigone*, *Oedipus's* daughter, brought life and relevance to the stage,
6. The added dignity of a new language took tragedy to an elevated level.
7. It allowed the spectators the opportunity to search out the lives of people greater than themselves, and to sympathize with their dilemma.

[Aristotle, 1996, *Poetics*, [384-347 BC], translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics Atkins, JWH, 1943, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase*, Cambridge, p8]

Aristotle believed that Sophocles' *King Oedipus* was an example of perfect tragedy. It is at this point that tragedy developed its reputation for being a narrative about superior orders of gods and royalty, an underlying intuition that still holds influence today.

Euripides (c.480-506 BC) was the last of the grand tragic poets so admired by Aristotle. Eighteen of his possible ninety-five plays have survived, including *The Bacchae*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Electra* and *Alcestis*. Euripides first introduced himself in the Dionysia in 455 BC, a year after the demise of Aeschylus, but was not as eminent as Aeschylus, or Sophocles for that matter. Euripides hardly ever bothered for the tastes of the judges, even satirizing the heroes of Greek mythology, which was either courageous or unwise for that time Euripides liked his women characters, such as *Medea*, to be strong, and three-dimensional. They had flaws and could make mistakes. They were not all of royal birth, nor daughters of gods. Euripides also cast slaves in his dramas, although not just as dull servants. These slaves had their own judgments and feelings, and had an appropriate part to play in his works. One can realize what a shock this must have been to the Greek audiences at the time, when women and slaves were so dominated in practical life.

Aristotle said that Sophocles was akin to depict men as they 'ought to be' whilst Euripides portrayed them 'as they were' and concluded that the plays of Sophocles were better to those of Euripides on this ground. In one case, however, he did rewrite when his play *Hippolytus* caused offence to the Athenian concepts of ideal womanhood. Euripides had originally

cast Phaedra as a shameless and wanton adulteress with a passion for her stepson. The play flopped until Euripides recreated the character of Phaedra to be a toy of the gods, hence to some extent exonerating her from her crimes.

Euripides however won five victories at the Dionysia, the last after his death. However his style of writing was so advanced that Euripides grew hugely popular in posterity.

In terms of genre, tragedy involves a tragic hero – one who is usually tempted to execute an action – after which the hero's fortunes ultimately suffer a turn down, ending with his death (or her death, as in the case of Antigone – though whether Antigone is the tragic 'hero' of Sophocles' play remains a controversial point). When analyzed this way, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is not actually the tragedy of Julius Caesar at all: he is just the character who is killed by the real tragic hero of the play, Brutus.

Roman tragedy principally suggests works by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c.4 BC - AD 65).Tragedies by Seneca were dramas of blood and horror intended to be read rather than performed for they contain seemingly unstageable elements, such as the piecing together of Hippolytus' dismembered body by his father and Medea killing her son and throwing down his dead body from the palace roof to his father below.

In the 20th century, Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen created the perfect tragic heroine of modernist theatre, Hedda Gabler, in his 1890 play of that name. Hedda has been entitled as 'the female Hamlet'.

In 1949, US playwright Arthur Miller wrote 'Tragedy and the Common Man', an article in which he justified the model of having an ordinary person as the central character of a tragic play. This was something of a revolution, since many tragic heroes prior to this had been extraordinary persons, princes or kings, and Miller's resolution to take an ordinary salesman as his central figure was viewed by some as inapt for the subject of tragedy. He wrote his article in response to unreceptive reviews which his play Death of a Salesman had received.

Thus we can conclude that the genre of tragedy from classical to modern time has gone through so many ever-developing aspects and innovative traits gradually focusing less on fortune and supernatural forces, more on the environment the character generates and the choices that the central character makes and more of nonverbal expression and soliloquy truly reflecting the growing alienation of modern man and age. Although we conclude with Walpole's famous comment that defines the essence of tragedies of all ages

'The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think'.

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