

Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Theatrical mask in a wall painting from Pompeii (first century A.D.).

Greek Drama: Out of Ritual

by David Adams Leeming

You probably never thought of religious services as being forms of drama, but in ancient Greece they were. Greek drama grew out of religious rituals honoring Dionysos (dī'ō-nī'səs), the god of wine and fertility. During these old celebrations, worshipers would dance around the altar of the god of wine and ecstasy, singing hymns to the wild, passionate accompaniment of the flute.

At some point during the sixth century B.C., these Dionysian celebrations became an annual festival held in Athens at a large outdoor amphitheater. Eventually, the dancing choruses of worshipers began competing for prizes (a bull or a goat). Tradition has it that a man named Thespis transformed these hymns into songs that still honored Dionysos but also told the story of a famous hero or even

another god. Then Thespis added another innovation: One chorus member would step away from the others to play the part of that hero or god. This actor wore a mask and entered into a dialogue with the chorus. Drama as we know it was born when the playwright Aeschylus (es'ki-ləs) added a second individual actor to the performance, creating the possibility of conflict. (Thespis is immortalized in our word *thespian*, which refers to an actor or actress.)

By the end of the fifth century B.C., this annual festival, called the Dionysia, had become a four-day extravaganza. Public business was suspended; prisoners were released on bail. As many as fourteen thousand spectators gathered in the open-air Theater of Dionysos to watch as playwrights chosen by the city magistrates competed for prizes in tragedy and comedy. After an opening day of traditional choral hymns, three dramatists in each category presented their plays over the next three days. Each morning, one of the playwrights presented three tragedies and a satyr (sat'ər) play, and that afternoon, another playwright presented a comedy. The **tragedies**, which had heroic characters and unhappy endings, were serious treatments of religious and mythic questions. The **satyr plays** were comic and even lewd treatments of the same themes. The **comedies** differed from the tragedies in having ordinary people as characters and happy endings.

The Theater of Dionysos: Like a Football Stadium

The Theater of Dionysos looked like a semicircular football stadium. The seats were carved out of stone on a hillside; at the bottom was a performance area divided into two parts.

In the front was a rounded place called the orchestra, a fairly large space where the chorus sang and danced around the remnant of an altar. Behind the orchestra was a platform where the actors spoke their lines from behind huge masks. These masks had exaggerated mouthpieces that amplified the actors' voices—an ancient solution to the problem resolved today by microphones. Many masks were stylized into familiar character types that were easily recognized by the audience. All the actors

were men, and the choruses were well-trained boys. By switching masks, each actor could play several roles.

A few days before the festival of Dionysos began, that year's competing



Greek Dionysian mask (early first century A.D.).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Gérard van der Kemp, 1958. (58.140) Photograph © 1985 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Ancient Greek theater at Epidaurus.

Scala/Art Resource, NY.

playwrights, choruses, and actors would march in a procession through the city of Athens. A herald would announce the titles of the competing plays, and masked dancers would parade through the streets, carrying a statue of Dionysos.

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In ancient Greece, religion and dramatic "entertainment" were closely related. To visualize a modern equivalent, imagine New York City's Broadway theaters as the center of a four-day religious festival in which everyone in the city took part.



Greek vase (late sixth century B.C.) showing Dionysos standing between a maenad and a satyr.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1906. (06.1021.85) Photograph © 1979 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A Tragic Myth: The House of Thebes

The basic plot of *Antigone* is part of a long myth that was as familiar to Athenian audiences as stories about the Pilgrims are to Americans today. A **myth** is an old story, rooted in a particular society, that explains a belief, a ritual, or some mysterious aspect of nature. Many myths also try to explain human suffering. In many cases, the myths explain our sufferings in terms of the workings of the gods—of fates that cannot be avoided, of curses that haunt generation after generation.

The following story is the myth the Athenians knew and the one that we must also know if we are to understand *Antigone*.

MEET THE WRITER

Writer, Actor, General, Politician

Sophocles (496?–406 B.C.) is generally considered the greatest of the ancient Greek playwrights. Few writers from any period have had a greater impact on drama, and few have been better loved in their own lifetimes.

A prominent citizen of Athens, Sophocles was known for his musical, poetic, and dramatic talents. He also took an active role in public life, serving as general, political leader, and priest. He is said to have been extremely handsome and graceful. At the age of about seventeen, he was the *choragos*, or chorus leader, in a dramatic celebration of Greece's victory over Persia. When he was twenty-eight, he caused a sensation by winning first prize for tragedy at the festival of Dionysos, defeating Aeschylus, the leading playwright of the day. He served as a general under Pericles. Over the next sixty-two years, Sophocles won twenty-four first prizes and seven second prizes in thirty-one competitions—the best record of any Greek playwright. Late in his life he was one of the elder statesmen who organized the recovery of Athens after its defeat at Syracuse.

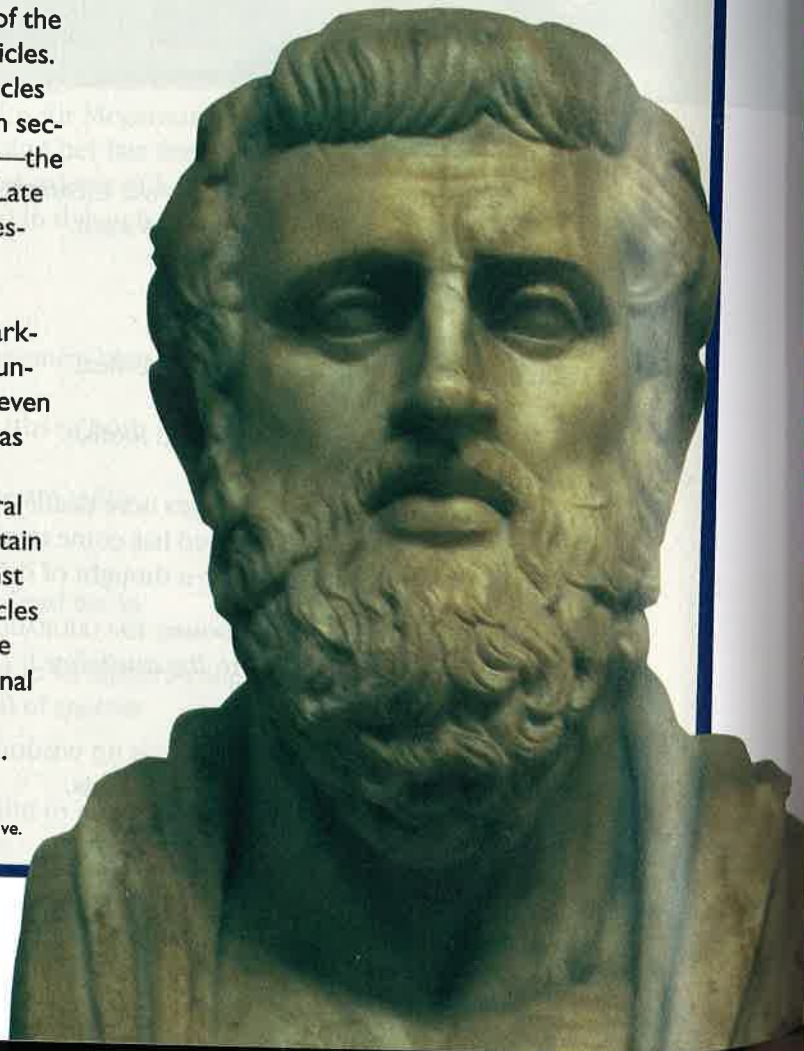
Sophocles made good use of a remarkably long life, writing more than one hundred twenty tragedies, of which only seven survive. A religious conservative, he was deeply concerned with the individual's need to find a place in the existing moral and cosmic order. His plays always contain a moral lesson—usually a caution against pride and religious indifference. Sophocles was also a great technical innovator: He added a third actor to Aeschylus's original two, introduced painted sets, and expanded the size of the chorus to fifteen.

The Bettmann Archive.

Few plays are more widely admired than Sophocles' "Theban" plays—three tragedies about King Oedipus of Thebes and his family. Sophocles wrote these plays over a forty-year period, and he actually began with the third part of the story, *Antigone*, first performed in 442 B.C. Twelve years later, Sophocles backtracked and wrote the first part of the story, *Oedipus the King*. It wasn't until the last year of his life that Sophocles wrote the middle segment, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Perhaps the ninety-year-old playwright hoped that people would soon say of him what one of his characters says after Oedipus dies and is mysteriously carried off by the gods:

"... he was taken without lamentation,
Illness or suffering; indeed his end
Was wonderful if mortal's ever was."



Tragedy was first defined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), and critics have been arguing about it ever since. Aristotle's definition is not a rule for what tragedy should be; it is a description of what he believed tragedy was, based on his observations of Greek drama, particularly the works of Sophocles.

What Is a Tragic Hero?

According to Aristotle, the function of **tragedy** is to arouse pity and fear in the audience so that we may be purged, or cleansed, of these unsettling emotions. Aristotle's term for this emotional purging is the Greek word *catharsis*. Although no one is exactly sure what Aristotle meant by *catharsis*, it seems

clear that he was referring to that strangely pleasurable sense of emotional release we experience after watching a great tragedy. For some reason, we usually feel exhilarated, not depressed, at the end.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy can arouse these twin emotions of pity and fear only if it presents a certain type of hero or heroine who is neither completely good nor completely bad.

Aristotle also says that the **tragic hero** should be someone "highly renowned and prosperous," which in Aristotle's day meant a member of the royalty.

Why not an ordinary working person? we might ask. The answer is simply that the hero must fall from tremendous good fortune. Otherwise, we wouldn't feel such pity and fear.

Critics have argued over what Aristotle meant by the tragic hero's "error or frailty." Is the hero defeated because of a single error of judgment, or is the cause of the hero's downfall a **tragic flaw**—a fundamental character weakness, such as destructive pride, ruthless ambition, or obsessive jealousy? In either interpretation, the key point is that the hero is on some level responsible for his or her own downfall. The hero is not the mere plaything of the gods—the helpless victim of fate or of someone else's vil-

lainy. By the end of the play, the tragic hero comes to recognize his or her own error and to accept its tragic consequences. The real hero does not curse fate or the gods. The real hero is humbled—and enlightened—by the tragedy.

Yet we, the audience, feel that the hero's punishment exceeds the crime, that the hero gets more than he or she deserves. We feel pity because the hero is a suffering human being who is flawed like us. We also feel fear because the hero is *better* than we are, and *still* he failed. What hope can there be for us?

... the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: For this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: For nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy; ... it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. ... There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. ...

—Aristotle, *The Poetics*,
translated by S. H. Butcher